



by Madam Ru

It's Not Easy to be a Man After Travelling to the Future



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It's Not Easy to Be a Man After Travelling to the Future

– Crossing to the Future, it's Not Easy to Be a Man –

- Book 4 -

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Chapter 301

The Truth of Control!

Seeing that Ling Lan had come to a realisation, Ling Xiao continued, "One more thing. In order for a mecha to display greater combat power, is it only possible by relying on those fancy and intricate moves? Ling Lan, have you ever thought about this question?"

Ling Lan was stumped by these words. The higher the difficulty of the mecha controls, the harder it was for the enemy to fight against it. This was the universally accepted standard of the mecha world... but now, Ling Xiao seemed to be suggesting that the truth was not so. Could it be that the entire mecha community was mistaken in their understanding? Or was it her father himself who was mistaken?

Ling Lan instantly eliminated the possibility of her father being wrong. If her father was mistaken in his theoretical understanding of mecha, then how in the world had he come by his god-class operator status? Thinking about the fewer than few god-class operators within the Federation, Ling Lan could not help but think, *Could it be that the official understanding of the mecha community on mecha control was actually wrong, which is why there are so few god-class operators? And my father just happened to understand it correctly, thus breaking the age record to become the youngest god-class operator of the Federation...?*

Considering this possibility, Ling Lan's spirits rallied. Did this mean that she was about to learn the truth of mecha control? No wonder it was said that truth was only accessible to a chosen few ¹.

Seeing the radiant light shining from Ling Lan's eyes, Ling Xiao knew his daughter had figured things out. He continued, "Have you heard of 'keeping things simple'? This phrase can also apply to mecha control."

"Does it mean that, it is actually the simplest controls that have the greatest power?" asked Ling Lan with a quirked brow.

"Hn, not quite. It should be more like, being able to control a mecha like your own limbs, using the least amount of effort to bring out the greatest efficiency of a mecha

— that is what a true mecha operator needs to do." Ling Xiao shared his insights, "Those special moves which require tremendous effort with equally tremendous power are not unimportant, but they are just unnecessary outside of those life-or-death moments or some other critical juncture. Using them would just drain and damage your mecha for no reason. If you can use the simplest control methods to deal with an opponent, then why be so wasteful?"

At first, when he had clambered out of the black hole and had been faced with a sky full of enemies, he could only use grand and domineering top-class techniques to frighten the enemy forces into submission. Reality had forced Ling Xiao to use those majestic moves exclusive to god-class operators, but the associated massive drain had secretly made Ling Xiao wince as well. Even though god-class mecha could replenish their energy from the stars automatically, after those two astoundingly powerful area-of-effect attacks he had performed, his god-class mecha's energy bank had descended to a point where red warnings had been flashing... Still, as the Federation managed to obtain the ultimate victory in that battle due to this expenditure, Ling Xiao felt that the cost was worth it.

However, this kind of operation was only applicable under that sort of critical scenario. If he had been facing a smaller group of enemies instead, Ling Xiao would never have made the same choice. Mind you, for a mecha operator, once their mecha's energy source was completely drained or was destroyed, it would mean certain death. As such, this was not something a good mecha operator should do. A good mecha operator would do their best to protect themselves even as they dealt with the enemy. They would understand that they only had one life — only by keeping this life would they be able to kill more enemies.

A flash of valour — Ling Xiao did not approve; a flare of brilliance — Ling Xiao did not feel it was worth it. Only by extending one's life could one be considered a good mecha operator, though deserters naturally did not count.

Thus, Ling Lan's fixation with chasing after grand and powerful controls had let Ling Xiao see Ling Lan's problem. This was a common issue with the Federation mecha operators — everyone felt that only the most powerful moves could represent the strength of a mecha operator, when in truth, this thinking was wrong. On the battlefield, the warriors who could survive till the end were often those mecha operators who seemed average in strength but had solid foundations. In the end, they would grow to become even stronger.

Meanwhile, those prodigious mecha operators who caused others to be in awe of them, despite possessing countless grand and elaborate moves, would often die young on the battlefield. Chasing the problem to its roots, every single case could be chalked down to depletion of energy or mecha breakdown, which led them to be struck down by their enemies to sleep forevermore among the stars.

Ling Xiao's words made Ling Lan begin to contemplate deeply. Indeed, regardless of how strong the enemy was, preserving oneself was the most crucial thing. Seeking a moment of valour and glory completely went against Ling Lan's original intentions. Ling Lan had only wanted to continue living on freely and safely; she did not want to let herself become a hero whose name would be carved on some memorial monument.

Enlightened, Ling Lan said solemnly to her father, "I understand now. From now on, I will change my fighting style. Thank you, father, for your guidance." Mecha controls which would let her continue living on was what she truly needed, as well as being the most worthy of her time.

Although her father had only said such a simple few sentences, those words had obviously included the insight Ling Xiao had gained over his 33 years of operating mecha, and so was extremely valuable. From them, Ling Lan could feel Ling Xiao's abundant fatherly love. This made Ling Lan feel extremely moved deep inside, but used to being cold and aloof, she just could not make herself do anything overly warm in response and thus could only sum up her emotions in a simple statement of thanks.

"Alright, since you understand now, then show me your foundational controls properly. I hope you won't disappoint me too much." Ling Xiao naturally could feel Ling Lan's gratitude — he had a slight smile on his lips, but his tone was still stern and grim. At this moment, in order to ensure his daughter would continue to live on safely, he chose to be a strict teacher and not a kind father.

"Yes, father!" Even as Ling Lan replied, she decisively used an advanced mecha repair kit on her mecha. After the repairs were done, the mecha's screen displayed that it was back at 100%. Even the right arm's control system which had been wrecked by Ling Xiao was restored to normal. Clenching and unclenching the mecha's right hand, Ling Lan found that there was no problem at all with its functioning; Ling Lan was extremely pleased.

Fortunately this place was the mecha world... mecha were able to be repaired and adjusted to optimum condition in a short period of time without wasting time which

could be spent on sparring. If this had been the real world, to repair a mecha and restore it to full fighting power would require quite a few hours, no matter how skilful the repair master was.

Even as Ling Lan sighed internally over how convenient the mecha world was, she controlled her mecha to pick Regretless up from the ground and slung it back over her back. Then, she assumed the most simple and unbelievably familiar stance everyone who used mecha would know.



The spectating Li Lanfeng and Zhao Jun saw the intermediate mecha suddenly change its initial attack style — its complex and dazzling advanced mecha skills and techniques were suddenly replaced with simplicity.

"Lanfeng, isn't this the basic assessment stance before entering Mecha World?" Zhao Jun stared at this stance which seemed so distant in memory and yet was so memorable, and could not help but ask dubiously.

Li Lanfeng responded affirmatively, "Yes, it is!" The basic assessment moves were the mecha operation movements he was most familiar with. That was the set of moves he had trained to proficiency alongside the rabbit mecha. There had even been many times when the two had challenged each other to see who could complete it faster and better. Who knew that many years after that, these basic assessment moves which could hardly be seen in Mecha World would appear right here before his eyes? This scene brought him back to that time, when he had been secretly watching the rabbit mecha train...

While Li Lanfeng was lost in his memories, the intermediate mecha moved. It used the most basic out-toed sprinting art — this was a type of high-speed sprinting method for mecha which was also extremely stable, a basic control movement that was able to support the body in executing any type of attack. However, in the later stages, after obtaining the better criss-crossed sprinting method as well as the more advanced Z-shaped body flash art, almost all the mecha operators would scorn the out-toed sprinting art for looking crude and ungainly. Moreover, its speed and evasion ability was also no better than the other two types of sprinting control skills, and so this most basic out-toed sprinting art was set aside.

Later on, with the appearance of even more advanced skills like the Figure-8 Spin,

Phantom Light Stream, Gamma Whirl, Light-and-Shadow Skim, and other high-speed flight evasion arts, this most basic out-toed sprinting art became utterly extinct among the advanced mecha warriors.

"Impossible, how can his speed be that fast?" Zhao Jun suddenly shouted in shock, startling Li Lanfeng from his reverie. Li Lanfeng eyes focused as he looked over, and sure enough, even though that intermediate mecha was using the most basic of basics, the out-toed sprint, that speed was no lesser than what they could achieve using the criss-crossed sprint or the Z-shaped body flash art at present. It could even be said that the other was one level higher; this was another reason why Zhao Jun would exclaim in such surprise.

"He's attacking now. It's the simplest bash attack." The intermediate mecha that had been running circles around the imperial mecha master suddenly drew close to the other, both fists efficiently striking out at the other's head without any bit of subterfuge.

"Using such a simple attack, how could he land a hit?" said Zhao Jun irritably. The other could obviously execute much more complex attacks, so why didn't he do so instead of using this type of attack method which was clearly not going to work?

Sure enough, the imperial mecha lifted an arm and blocked the intermediate mecha's fists. But right then, the intermediate mecha's fists retracted the moment they touched the other, and immediately after, its feet kicked off the ground and swung powerfully at the other... It looked like that blatant dual-fist attack was actually just a feint — the true finishing move of the intermediate mecha was from its feet.

"This is the basic stomping art! Hells, what exactly is he trying to do?" Zhao Jun could not help but wrap his arms around his head and wail. He wanted to see an instructional fight, not watch as an intermediate mecha displayed the basic assessment moves one after the other... could that even be considered a real attack?

Li Lanfeng, who had originally been responding to everything Zhao Jun said, was unusually quiet at this time. Within his cockpit, his expression was one of intense shock, filled with disbelief...

"This is the rabbit mecha's most habitual attack move. It's also something he created. Whenever he had something he couldn't resolve, he would default to using this move..." Across the distance of 7 years, this familiar move emerged once more before his eyes

— even as it made him emotional, he was filled with shock and doubt.



Ling Xiao was rather taken aback by this unexpected kick of Ling Lan's because this stomping art was not an attack technique. Instead, it was a type of basic movement skill which worked together with the out-toed sprint to help shift directions and speed. Ever since the out-toed sprint fell out of favour, this stomping art had also been forgotten by the mecha operators.

Ling Xiao did not find it surprising that Ling Lan would use the stomping art, but the fact that Ling Lan had actually made some improvements to it and integrated it into her attack did surprise him. He was even greatly pleased by it — this meant that his daughter's mastery of the basic controls had already reached an apex, otherwise she could not have evolved these basic moves so naturally into attack techniques. It looked like Ling Lan had taken his legacy to heart — she had learned the foundations extremely well, securing them solidly.

"Not bad!" Ling Xiao did not hold back on giving his daughter praise, even as both his hands rose to meet Ling Lan's feet.

Chapter 302

Seven Years Ago?

There was a loud 'boom' — due to the collision this time, the intermediate mecha was sent flying back. Meanwhile, Ling Xiao's body actually wavered slightly as well due to the astounding power behind this stomping art.

"This is no ordinary stomping art..." Ling Xiao was stunned. Could it be that his daughter had added some special technique into this stomping art?

Before Ling Xiao's astonishment could fade, something even more surprising occurred. The intermediate mecha actually flew backwards at a greater speed than that which it had used to attack Ling Xiao. In the air, Ling Lan flipped her body without trying to control the mecha, letting it careen as it would towards the walls of the private room...

"Ah ah ah, he's going to hit the wall!" Despite being extremely dissatisfied with how the intermediate mecha was using basic assessment moves to fight, when he saw the other leave his mecha alone to let it just hurtle towards a wall at high speed, Zhao Jun was instantly yelling out in concern.

Only Ling Xiao and Li Lanfeng had a gleam of light run through their eyes at the same time, though the meaning behind each gleam was vastly different.

Ling Xiao believed his daughter was not that weak — he believed that his daughter would not really crash into the wall. On the other hand, the name of a skill which belonged solely to the rabbit mecha he knew had floated into Li Lanfeng's mind: *'Rabbit Sky Leap!'*. Oftentimes when it had seemed like the situation was completely out of control at high speeds, the rabbit mecha would use this move to turn things around.

Sure enough, just as the intermediate mecha was about to slam into the wall, Ling Lan, who had long been prepared, operated the mecha's two strong and powerful legs to kick out forcefully at the wall. There was a loud 'boom', and the entire room suddenly began to shake violently, almost sending the spectating Zhao Jun's and Li Lanfeng's mecha tumbling off their feet.

Meanwhile, following this push off the wall, the intermediate mecha used this surge of rebound force to send its body shooting like lightning towards the imperial mecha standing in the middle of the stage...

Zhao Jun and Li Lanfeng reacted quickly to steady their mecha. Once they were stable once more, they turned their eyes towards the stage again and saw the intermediate mecha zipping around like lightning back and forth across the private room.

Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang!... the powerful sounds of collision reverberated like the wild rain of a thunderstorm within the combat room. The two mecha sparred — one as quick as lightning, its movements almost untrackable, while the other was as steady as Mount Tai ¹, taking moves as they came, unmoving as a mountain ².

"This is just the stomp technique, countless applications of the stomp technique..." Zhao Jun peered closely for several 10 or so seconds, then felt his eyes were somewhat raw, with even a trace of pain. He could not help but raise his hands to rub at his eyes. It turned out that the speed of the intermediate mecha had already exceeded the capacity of Zhao Jun's motion vision — having stared intently at the screen all this time, he was now feeling rather overwhelmed.

"Yes, it's the stomp technique..." But this was no ordinary stomp technique, otherwise that imperial mecha would not have surreptitiously shifted its original stance. In contrast to Zhao Jun's carelessness, the conscientious Li Lanfeng had caught the shift. The imperial mecha, who had initially been standing straight with its legs together, had now spread its legs, and its knees were slightly bent. This was the specific stance of a mecha stabilising its lower body. It was clear to see that the intermediate mecha's stomp technique was dealing significant impact to the imperial operator, causing the other to have no choice but to use this most stable stance while defending.

And the only one who could utilise the stomp technique so proficiently, in Li Lanfeng's memory, was the rabbit mecha and no other. Could it be that the rabbit he had searched for in these 7 long years was this intermediate mecha warrior before his eyes right now? ³ But based on the rabbit mecha's strength, he should not have remained stuck at intermediate mecha level... One question in Li Lanfeng's heart seemed to have been answered now, but this answer merely spawned even more questions...

Just as Zhao Jun was kneading at his eyes and while Li Lanfeng was plagued with questions, the intermediate mecha, who had been moving at high speeds all this while, suddenly dropped to land at a corner of the stage after one more violent clash with

the imperial mecha. Due to its sudden stop from a high speed, the mecha was sent sliding forwards 5 metres or so before it found firm footing.

Perhaps extremely used to this type of abrupt stop from high speeds, though the intermediate mecha slid for about 5 metres, its upper body did not waver at all. This proved that this amount of slide was within the intermediate mecha's calculations.

Li Lanfeng and Zhao Jun shared a look, unsure why the intermediate mecha had suddenly chosen to stop its attack when the situation was looking so optimistic. An idea sparked through Li Lanfeng's mind. He remembered the rabbit mecha saying once that this type of high-speed stomping actually put a great burden on mecha. Trainee mecha would not be able to withstand it for long — could it be that it was the same for intermediate mecha?

Seeing this, Ling Xiao stood up from his defensive stance and said to Ling Lan with a smile, "Looks like you understand now."

"Yes, thank you, father, for your guidance," replied Ling Lan gratefully. That combination of moves she had just performed was so familiar to her they were embedded in her marrow — it was no effort at all to execute, perhaps even casual and easy.

Still, whether in terms of speed or attack power, that set of moves had not been any weaker than any of the other advanced techniques she had used previously. In fact, they could even be considered better, because she still had energy to spare in her controls, unlike before when even as she drained herself, her mecha was forced to operate over its capacity, damaging its lifespan.

This also made Ling Lan realise on a profound level what Ling Xiao's words meant. Having understood, she stopped her attack, because she had already obtained what she wanted from this instructional fight. Mission complete, it would be a waste of time to continue fighting.

Ling Lan's words made Ling Xiao's smile deepen. Ling Xiao knew very well that Ling Lan had achieved true understanding, once again proving that his daughter's learning ability was absolutely superior to others'.

"Your stomp technique should have been integrated with some other special technique. How did you think of it?" Ling Xiao was extremely curious. Mind you, those

who had only begun to learn mecha control would just rotely follow instructions to complete the training exercises. Normally, they would never even think of combining or improvising on any of these controls... Ling Lan's ability to do so undoubtedly surprised Ling Xiao greatly, because even he had not been able to do so when he had been younger.

"By coincidence. Back when I first started learning mecha control, I met someone else who had also just begun learning mecha control. The other was a control genius, able to execute each move to utter perfection. His results were very good; I was no match for him at first. This made me determined. Things he could do, what was stopping me from doing them too? So I thought hard on how to increase my mecha's speed, and worked hard to perfect my transitions between all types of actions. Without knowing it, I applied a leg technique from physical skills to my mecha control, and discovered that it actually produced a certain effect. And so, I began to experiment..." Hiding part of the truth, Ling Lan told her father the story of her meeting with the leopard mecha⁴ back then...

As Ling Lan was telling the story, she realised that a large part of her proficiency with the basic assessment controls should definitely be credited to the leopard mecha. The other's companionship had undoubtedly made that dry and routine training time of her life become considerably more interesting. Upon closer examination, of all the basic controls Ling Lan knew now, this set of basic assessment controls was the one Ling Lan was most adept and comfortable with. This was why when Ling Xiao had insisted for Ling Lan to use basic controls, she had chosen this set without thinking. Reality proved that this was the set that had seeped into her bones, the set which had become part of her basic instinct, the set of basic controls that she had truly mastered.

Understanding all this, Ling Xiao prepared to go offline. Although he did not care much about the enlistment assessment results of the military academy, as the head of the division's assessment delegation, he should still at least show his face and ask cursorily about the results at the end of every day. Otherwise, the administrators of the school might misunderstand and assume that the 23rd Division did not care at all about the First Men's Military Academy... In order to successfully accept his daughter into the 23rd Division later on, he needed to maintain a good relationship with the school no matter what.

After saying goodbye to his daughter, Ling Xiao instantly logged off from the private room. The next time he went online, his mecha would automatically appear within the main hall of the mecha combat hall. If Ling Lan required instruction again later, he

would not have to spend the effort finding his way here anymore...

Seeing the imperial mecha vanish, Li Lanfeng knew the pair was about to leave. Impulsively, he rushed forwards and connected to his general comms to say, "Hello, can you please wait a moment?"

Ling Lan was just about to go offline — hearing this, she paused and raised her head to look towards the advanced mecha who had spoken.

Seeing the intermediate mecha looking at him silently, Li Lanfeng hesitated for a moment, but then asked resolutely (because he did not want to miss another chance), "May I ask, 7 years ago, were you at the capital city of planet Azure?"

"Planet Azure? The capital city?" Ling Lan's face was filled with confusion. Seven years ago, she had indeed let Little Four secretly bring her out into the virtual world, but back then, the place she had asked Little Four to bring her to had been the capital city of Doha!

"Uh, Boss... I forgot to tell you. Back when you asked me to take you to the capital, I accidentally chose planet Azure..." Little Four, who had been drawn out by the advanced mecha warrior's question, revealed his blunder to Ling Lan.

At these words, Ling Lan instantly had her guard up. *"How could he know that I was at planet Azure 7 years ago? Could it be that I was exposed somewhere?"*

Little Four became agitated by this supposition — that's right, back then, he and Boss had been undercover, so how could someone else have discovered this? Little Four quickly scanned the other's spiritual power...

"Hmm?" Li Lanfeng frowned lightly. He had sensed some strange disturbance in his surroundings, but could not say for certain what it was. Cautious and vigilant, he immediately wrapped up his spiritual power with his spectre ability. Regardless of whether he was being paranoid, Li Lanfeng's first reflex was still to choose and protect himself.

"Ah... what a familiar energy signature!" Little Four sensed Li Lanfeng's spectre power and instantly exclaimed in shock. He swiftly dashed back into Ling Lan's mindspace and rummaged through his memory bank of energy signatures, comparing them to the energy he had sensed. Soon, he had dug up the long-buried information of the leopard mecha, that is, the spectre whom they had met back then.

"Boss, we've bumped into an old acquaintance!" replied Little Four excitedly. Because Ling Lan had forbidden him from taking the initiative to venture out and test the spiritual power of others, Little Four had not noticed anything before this even though Li Lanfeng had already been standing there for a long while. Of course, this was also because Little Four had been busy helping Ling Lan control her mecha at the time, with no mind to spare.

"Who?" asked Ling Lan, brow lifted in curiosity.

"It's that leopard mecha! That spectre who watched the mecha fight with us!" Little Four responded enthusiastically.

"So it's him..." Ling Lan was floored. She had just been telling her father about him, and now he actually showed up? It appeared that she and this leopard were truly tied by fate.

Chapter 303

Rabbit? Leopard?

Li Lanfeng waited with bated breath for the intermediate mecha's reply, but the other was unexpectedly silent. The combat room was thrust into a still silence.

Li Lanfeng's heart drooped lower and lower as time passed — did this silence mean denial? Right then, an alert rang out suddenly inside his cockpit. Li Lanfeng clicked on the notification by reflex, and saw that it was an alert for a friend request. It was from someone called [Lingtian First-String], and there was a message included: *Leopard, let's talk some other time.*

Li Lanfeng's heart was instantly brimming with happiness. He tried to click on 'accept' immediately, but his initially extraordinarily nimble hands and fingers, which could execute really challenging advanced mecha warrior moves, were suddenly weak and slow. He tried tapping the screen three times in succession and actually failed every single time.

Li Lanfeng took in a deep breath, and then steadying his right hand with his left, he firmly pressed the 'accept' button.

When he saw the name [Lingtian First-String] appear on his friends list, Li Lanfeng felt his entire body go weak, his eyes beginning to prickle with warmth. He quickly raised his head, holding back the tears of joy which had been about to flow out...

After searching for so long, he had finally reconnected this friendship which had been interrupted for 7 years! *Dear Heavens, even though you were the one to condemn me to a Phoenix Thrall Fate, at this time, I still want to thank you. Thank you for giving me this chance!*

Zhao Jun saw the intermediate mecha log off without answering Li Lanfeng's question and was instantly livid. "F*ck, how could he be so cold and unfeeling? Is it really that hard to answer yes or no?" Of course, he was just grumbling for the sake of it; after all, to answer or not to answer was the other's right. Zhao Jun was just irritated on behalf of his good friend Li Lanfeng. Even though Li Lanfeng had never said anything about it to him, Zhao Jun still vaguely knew that Li Lanfeng had been looking for someone in

the mecha world all this time over the past four years.

Zhao Jun's disgruntled words shook Li Lanfeng from his joyful reverie. He quickly said, "No, Zhao Jun, he has already told me the answer..."

"Huh?" Zhao Jun was flummoxed. But he clearly had not heard the other say anything...

Li Lanfeng did not explain, only continuing on excitedly, "I'll tell you about it later. Let us go!" That said, he left the private room.

Zhao Jun could only scratch his head helplessly. Since Li Lanfeng had said he would tell him later, then he had no choice but to wait for later. Although he really would like to know now, he could do nothing since his friend was very tight-lipped ¹. Fortunately, his patience had already been trained up by hanging out with Li Lanfeng over these past few years, otherwise he would certainly have been suffocated by his need to know. At this thought, Zhao Jun could only sigh softly and follow Li Lanfeng as he left the room.

Once Ling Lan saw that the other had accepted her friend request, she had logged off. It wasn't that she did not want to catch up with the other, but her father had just logged off to hurry to the assessment venue. It would not be appropriate for her to linger here; after all, officially, she was on duty to accompany Ling Xiao.

Later on, after saying goodbye to her father, Ling Lan returned to her living quarters. At this time, Qi Long and the other five were still not back from their training classes yet. Ling Lan did not wait for them, instantly logging onto Mecha World. Ling Lan believed that that stupid leopard must definitely still be in Mecha World waiting for her.

Sure enough, the moment she was online, she received a voice message from [Self-Defined Destiny]. "Rabbit, where are you?" Damm*t, was she still a rabbit now? ² In the past, she had already told him not to call her 'rabbit', but this fellow just would not change — doing the same even now.

Ling Lan could not help but roll her eyes. She really wanted to pretend she heard nothing, but she could hear the other's anxiety in his voice. Thinking about how they had not seen each other for 7 years and how it had indeed been extremely difficult for them to meet again, she decided to be merciful and forgive him this once. And so, Ling Lan replied coolly, "Leopard, come to the mecha combat main hall."

In less than a minute, she saw an advanced mecha entering the doors of the combat hall, sprinting over to her side. "Rabbit, I'm here." The advanced mecha ostentatiously waved at her, but that special-class mecha which had been with him was nowhere to be seen.

"Leopard, why isn't your friend here?" asked Ling Lan curiously.

"I did not know whether you would mind, so I asked him to go ahead," replied the leopard mecha, now [Self-Defined Destiny], with a smile.

Ling Lan stared flatly at [Self-Defined Destiny] — hells, did she come off as such a small-minded person? Besides, the leopard mecha was just some random stranger she had met in the virtual world... what gave him the confidence to believe that she would rank him so important in her mind? That she would care if he had other friends? Hng hng, if he only knew she had countless little companions by her side she had grown up with, that five of them were as close and intimate with her as could be...

As expected, the leopard mecha had an uncanny rapport with her. As if sensing Ling Lan's thoughts, he hurried to explain, "I was thinking to introduce you to him after obtaining your permission..."

This greatly appeased Ling Lan's dragon heart ³ — so it was true that the leopard respected her immensely, just as he had back then. Nothing had changed.

Thus, Ling Lan said, "It's really fine. In future, you can just bring anyone you want to."

At these words, [Self-Defined Destiny]'s smile deepened and he replied boisterously, "Understood!"

Ling Lan rubbed her brow helplessly and asked, "How did you recognise me earlier?" This was a question both she and Little Four were wondering — after all, it's been 7 years and she had even changed her mecha; there was nothing of before. Although the other was a spectre, Little Four was certain that the other had not used his spectre abilities to check them out, so there was no reason for him to have identified her...

"Your stomp technique is no ordinary stomp technique. In every assessment, you would use it, how could I forget it?" replied [Self-Defined Destiny] with a smile, "If you stop using it, then I would have no way to recognise you anymore." [Self-Defined Destiny] could not help but rejoice in his heart that the other had coincidentally displayed these basic controls, allowing him to find the other.

[Self-Defined Destiny]'s words enlightened Ling Lan and Little Four instantly. So it had been Ling Lan's habitual movements which had exposed her.

"I believe that, in this world, only you would know this technique. Seven years ago we lost contact, causing me to look for you for these whole seven years. And now I've finally found you," sighed [Self-Defined Destiny].

Ling Lan found herself rather embarrassed now. Over these past 7 years, she had never once logged onto Mecha World, instead spending her time completing the learning space's missions or working on her father's legacy; [Self-Defined Destiny]'s 7 years of effort could be said to be completely futile.

"Is that imperial operator from your sect?" [Self-Defined Destiny] asked curiously.

"Er... yes," replied Ling Lan after a brief hesitation. She was not purposefully trying to hide anything, but this was her first reunion with the leopard after so long, so there were some things that just could not be explained properly. Even though she and the leopard mecha shared a great rapport and she also greatly appreciated the friendship between them, he was still someone that she had met in the virtual world after all — Ling Lan could not treat him like how she treated Qi Long and her other real world companions and trust him fully. However, Ling Lan's reply was not a lie either. She had inherited her father Ling Xiao's legacy, so of course she belonged to the same sect as her father.

"I had thought so with just one glance. Every move of that imperial operator was utilising the 4 simplest basic movements in defensive controls — block, push, obstruct, and hold ⁴. Without using any bit of extraneous force, minimalist to the extreme... it's like what you told me at the start. Completely mastering the basic controls and using them harmoniously, making them truly part of our natural instinct," exclaimed [Self-Defined Destiny] in awe.

Ling Lan was startled by these words, and quickly asked, "Our fight, did you record it?"

[Self-Defined Destiny] replied sheepishly, "I'm sorry, without obtaining permission, I recorded it. If you mind, I'll immediately delete it."

"No need. I only hope you can make a copy for me. I would also like to take a look." Even though Little Four had also recorded the fight, there were some things that just

could not be seen clearly from a first-person perspective. Perhaps viewing the fight from a third-person perspective would allow her to see things clearer.

"Okay." [Self-Defined Destiny] immediately sent the video file over to Ling Lan. When Ling Lan received it, she instantly opened it and began to watch it.

Li Lanfeng saw [Lingtian First-String] become still and silent, and just knew that the other must be fully absorbed in watching the video. He smiled knowingly — he was just too familiar with this state of the rabbit. Oftentimes, when the rabbit had learnt a new movement or had a good idea or some insight, he would descend into this sort of acutely focused state, as if no one else existed around him. This brought Li Lanfeng back to the beginning... every time this happened, he would always sit silently beside the rabbit mecha and wait patiently for the rabbit mecha to surface from his thoughts.

After approximately 5 minutes, Li Lanfeng finally heard [Lingtian First-String] sigh and say, "As expected, from your perspective, his impressiveness is even more pronounced."

Only now did Ling Lan feel how amazing her father Ling Xiao was. Now her father's basic controls were what could truly be called the best of the best. Even though it had only been the simplest of defensive motions, whether it was the timing of the interception or the motion itself, everything was perfectly calculated. Each defensive move had been applied when her power was at its weakest point. Moreover, each time, the hand motions of Ling Xiao's mecha had been extremely small — it was clear to see that the drain on the mecha's energy had been contained at the minimum baseline. Ling Lan believed that even if her father had been controlling a trainee mecha against her barrage of wild attacks, he would still be able to block and defend against them all using the least amount of energy.

Her father's control was what could truly be called basic controls. Compared to her father, Ling Lan's basic controls were undoubtedly still much too fancy and elaborate; compared to her father, she still had a really long way to go.

"The imperial operator is naturally very impressive. Basic controls are truly very interesting. In future, I must learn from you and use lower mecha to train my advanced mecha basic controls and techniques. This way, I should be able to experience more of the true essence of basic controls." [Self-Defined Destiny] stared at Ling Lan with starry eyes, as if saying, wasn't he such a smart cookie?

Ling Lan could not help but sweatdrop, uncertain how she should respond. Was she supposed to say that she had only done so because she did not have enough points accumulated to redeem a better mecha?

Still, thinking about it, using a lower mecha to execute advanced mecha techniques did indeed demand a lot from the operator. It was very challenging, which was not a bad thing for an operator, and may perhaps truly aid him in his development. At this thought, Ling Lan decided not to say anything. This was because she also really did not know how to explain to the other why she still did not have enough points to redeem an advanced mecha after these 7 years.

Just like this, because Ling Lan did not know how to explain and also felt that this was harmless to the other, she chose to remain silent. This led Li Lanfeng to think that his assumption was correct, thus pushing him onto this path of no return, eventually leading to the creation of a legendary path belonging solely to himself...

Chapter 304

A Strange and Wondrous Misunderstanding!

"Right, do you have a battle clan in Mecha World? I don't have one yet, so if you still have a spot open in yours, why don't you add me?" Li Lanfeng did not want to once again be passing strangers with his rabbit. He had not joined any battle clans thus far because — for one, he was afraid of exposing himself, and two, hadn't he been hoping for this precise scenario all this while? He only wanted to join the rabbit mecha's battle clan, even if the entire battle clan was made up of only the rabbit mecha...

"Uh, I'm in the process of building one..." Ling Lan had not expected that the leopard still had not joined a battle clan after these 7 years apart. Could it be that he had not enrolled into a military academy that year, instead choosing to go to a co-ed general academy? Or was he perhaps just a casual ¹ mecha operator? Otherwise, with the other's control skills, it was impossible that no one wanted him.

Only military academies had battle clans, because all the cadets at military academies would eventually be Federation soldiers in future. The battle clan a cadet establishes at school would be extended into the army divisions they enlist into later and be expanded further there. In contrast, the students from a co-ed general academy may not necessarily become a soldier in future, hence they also did not have the right to form battle clans.

Of course, this did not mean that these students had no chance of joining battle clans — some mecha operators who liked mecha piloting would just sign up to join some battle clans that lacked members. Of course, no matter how skilled these people were in control skills, they would never become permanent members of a battle clan. The reason was simple — whether it was at present or in the future, they would never be military personnel. Only if they were willing to serve in the army later on and became proper soldiers would they then have the right to become permanent members of a battle clan.

Ling Lan was well aware that many mecha battle clans in Mecha World were extensions of mecha battle clans in the real world. In saying this, [Self-Defined Destiny] was basically confirming that he was similarly without a battle clan in the

real world. This pretty much proved that [Self-Defined Destiny] was probably not a military academy student. Otherwise, with his abilities, even if he did not join any other battle clans, he was fully capable of making one of his own.

Ling Lan, who was originally planning to ask which school [Self-Defined Destiny] was studying at, found herself not daring to ask now. She was afraid she would hurt the other's feelings. Based on the leopard's passion and seriousness in honing his mecha control skills, Ling Lan knew very well that, if at all possible, the leopard would definitely want to study at a military academy.

"In the process of building?" Li Lanfeng was taken aback by Ling Lan's answer.

Someone who could enter the virtual world to learn mecha controls 7 years ago should be about his age, or perhaps even a little older than him... why had the other not built a battle clan up till now? Could it be that the other was not a military academy cadet, or perhaps did not manage to enrol into a military academy to begin with and could only attend a general academy? And now he had become an official soldier so he could finally build a battle clan?

Li Lanfeng, who had wanted to ask the rabbit which school he was attending, hesitated. What if the other asked him the same question in return after? When the other found out that he was studying at the First Men's Military Academy, would the other's heart be pierced through by a heavy arrow?

"Then, when you build it, can you keep a spot for me?" After some consideration, Li Lanfeng decided not to ask this sensitive question, instead choosing to ask to join Ling Lan's battle clan in a serious manner. In Li Lanfeng's heart, even if the rabbit was just a small foot soldier, he would still be willing to become a member of the other's battle clan and follow the rabbit onto the battlefield to fight together.

"Uh, okay, will you become a soldier in the future?" asked Ling Lan carefully. If the leopard had not given up, replying yes, she would save a permanent member's spot for him. Later, once he entered the military, he could join officially. If not, she could only regretfully give the leopard a temporary contract. Ling Lan needed to take responsibility on behalf of all of the other members of her battle clan.

Ling Lan's question stumped Li Lanfeng for a beat, but he quickly figured out the reason behind it and replied firmly, "Of course." As expected, the rabbit was currently a soldier! Li Lanfeng was glad that he had not asked impulsively.

"That's fine then. There'll be a spot for you in my battle clan." Ling Lan let out a sigh of relief. She was well aware of the leopard mecha's raw talent and abilities in control — he was definitely no weaker than Qi Long. If the leopard could join, it would be much better than finding someone unfamiliar. She believed that Qi Long and the others would not dislike the leopard's character and temperament.

For some reason, Ling Lan had boundless confidence in the leopard, believing that he could definitely obtain the acknowledgement of the other clan members.

"We'll go to the 23rd Division," cautioned Ling Lan. She did not know how old the leopard was, whether the other was already at the age of enlistment. In any case, she wanted to notify the other so he did not apply for the wrong division. Four years later, when they went to the 23rd Division, even if the leopard was still a foot soldier, she could use her authority to transfer the leopard to her side so he could officially join her battle clan.

"Yes, understood," Li Lanfeng responded happily. He had originally planned to apply for enlistment at the 1st Division, but now decisively switched his goal for next year to enter the 23rd Division and then wait for his rabbit to find him.

Thus, the both of them gingerly avoided asking about school, each thinking that they were right in their assumptions about the other. In this manner, they missed their earliest chance to truly discover the truth about each other... it had to be said that Ling Lan and Li Lanfeng did indeed have amazing rapport with one another — even their misunderstandings synced up with one another.

"That special-class mecha friend of yours... could it be that he also has no battle clan? Won't he invite you to stay together?" Ling Lan recalled the special-class mecha that had been together with [Self-Defined Destiny], which had also been very strong, and could not help but ask curiously.

"He and I both do not have official battle clans, though he is temporarily contracted to a mecha battle clan. The contract will automatically dissolve next year. If your battle clan still has a spot at that time, please add him too. Of course, if you feel that that's inappropriate, you can first make a temporary contract. Like me, he'll also become a soldier in the future." Only then did Li Lanfeng remember there was still Zhao Jun to consider, so he quickly explained, suggesting a temporary contract on his own at the same time.

Li Lanfeng knew well that he wanted to follow the rabbit mecha because of that wonderful affinity and rapport he had with the other, which was carved deeply into his heart to this very day. However, Zhao Jun had no ties whatsoever to the rabbit mecha — he could neither trouble the rabbit mecha nor decide Zhao Jun's future for him. After all, the rabbit could very well just be a small foot soldier, and based on Zhao Jun's current power level, he would at least obtain the rank of first lieutenant. Therefore, if Zhao Jun and the rabbit intended to collaborate, signing a temporary contract would be beneficial for both sides.

Li Lanfeng was not someone who needed to push all his friends into one clan — he knew very well that interpersonal relationships required affinity. He was certain that, for the sake of the rabbit mecha, he could compromise and tolerate things that he typically would not tolerate. He had already made up his mind that, even if the rabbit's battle clan consisted of a whole team of foot soldiers, he would still lower himself and curry favour with them in order to obtain their acknowledgement. This all stemmed from his determination to follow the rabbit which had been established 7 years ago. In the face of this type of conviction, all tribulations were but passing clouds.

"Hn, let's talk about it when the time comes. Right now, I have 5 other companions who should all be permanent members of the battle clan in future. Adding you, there should still be a few slots for a 12-man team. Oh, there are also two others who I have my eye on, though I still haven't asked them whether they're willing to join... if the clan is still not full yet next year, ask your friend over to try out. If everyone is satisfied, then let's stay together." Ling Lan did not refuse Zhao Jun outright. After all, Zhao Jun was already a special-class operator at present; meanwhile, the support member candidates of the clan was pretty much settled, so all they needed to add were specialized mecha operators. Thus, Zhao Jun was undoubtedly extremely suitable.

"Oh, alright!" answered Li Lanfeng immediately, decisively agreeing on behalf of Zhao Jun. Zhao Jun did not have a battle clan for next year anyway, so it should not be a problem for him to hang out with Li Lanfeng for a bit. Hearing that the rabbit also had his eye on two other people, Li Lanfeng asked, "Who are the other two? Also people in Mecha World?"

"One of them is called [No Mecha Unrepaired], from Mecha World. As for whether the other has an ID in Mecha World, I can't be sure. He's a genius here on our end," replied Ling Lan.

"[No Mecha Unrepaired], this name is really familiar..." Li Lanfeng paused over the

name for a bit, then suddenly recalled it. Wasn't he that genius mecha engineer-mechanic who the Thunder King had his eye on? At the start, in order to get him, the Thunder King had gone so far as to seal off all the other's resources within Mecha World, causing the other to fail his assessment two years in a row. If the other had failed just one more time, he would have been expelled from the First Men's Military Academy...

"[No Mecha Unrepaired] is from the Mecha Engineering specialization in the First Men's Military Academy..." muttered Li Lanfeng softly.

"Oh, so you've heard of him!" said Ling Lan in surprise, "Yes, he's that prodigy of the Mecha Engineering specialization in the First Men's Military Academy. He was pressured by the Thunder King, and I just happened to help him out by escorting him to Suncreed City. I wonder if he would be willing to join my battle clan."

"So the one who helped him to Suncreed City was you..." Li Lanfeng gaped at the mecha before him. The Thunder King had been livid over the matter, but no matter how much manpower or material resources he invested into finding the person who helped [No Mecha Unrepaired], he just could not find them. This forced the Thunder King to have no choice but to suck it up in silence — Li Lanfeng recalled how pleased he himself had been when he had found out about it back then.

Sure enough, his rabbit was his god of luck. Even though they had not recognised each other yet back then, the rabbit had still helped him to inflict a round of torment on the Thunder King. Li Lanfeng stared at the intermediate mecha across from him with grateful eyes but kept this appreciation to himself.

"I think he should be willing to join," said Li Lanfeng with a smile. The rabbit was the benefactor of [No Mecha Unrepaired] — this personal debt would have already made it hard for the other to refuse to begin with. On top of that, the rabbit was inviting him to join his battle clan, which was also a form of acknowledgement as well as a form of assistance.

Mind you, although all the other factions in the academy also coveted [No Mecha Unrepaired]'s engineering abilities, they did not dare to offend the Thunder King. Thus, no battle clan had invited [No Mecha Unrepaired] into their ranks. Without the assistance of any battle clan, even if he passed the assessment this year, the next few years would be very tough for him as some assessments would require the collaboration of a battle clan to complete... the rabbit's invitation would definitely be

a lifeline ² which the other would never refuse.

"I hope things turn out as you say." Ling Lan felt that it was about time for her to really build her battle clan now. Even though she still could not officially set one up in the school, she could start testing things out in Mecha World, as well as let Qi Long and the others get to know the leopard a bit.

Just like this, Ling Lan and Li Lanfeng arranged a time for their next meeting in Mecha World and then respectively logged off.

The moment Ling Lan logged off, she found that Qi Long and the others had returned. So, she called them all over and solemnly declared that, within Mecha World, she would officially establish their battle clan —— Lingtian!

There was no helping it. This bunch of brats had long decided on this ostentatious name. Otherwise, why would they have chosen to style their usernames in 'Lingtian XXX' fashion? If she did not give their battle clan this name, this bunch of brats would definitely flip the table!

Chapter 305

Interrogation!

Late afternoon in Mecha World, Grandsweep City. This city was a large city filled with missions. Right now, quite a few mecha were sprawled about relaxing at a wide plaza not too far from the city gates. There were also some who were standing around idly, resting with their eyes closed.

These mecha were mostly advanced mecha, though there was also a small number of lower mecha and intermediate mecha among them. Some of them had perhaps taken some time from their afternoon to come here and rest, but many more were here to look for comrades with aligned goals, or perhaps to wait to join any team preparing to complete missions but lacked members. This could be their chance to join a battle clan...

That's right. This was the assembly ground of unaffiliated mecha operators. Without a battle clan, whenever they had free time, they would come here to try their luck, to see if they had any chance to join some battle clan. Even a temporary one would be better than not being part of any battle clan. To become stronger, joining a battle clan was a necessary choice. Upon successfully obtaining an advanced mecha, to become stronger, one would need venture into even tougher areas to complete the missions there, and all of this came with the prerequisite of having a battle clan — otherwise, you could not even accept these missions to begin with, and so would have no way of entering those treacherous areas.

As mentioned previously, not everyone would be able to join a battle clan, as establishing a battle clan was the special right belonging only to military academy cadets or army men. Thus, the number of unaffiliated mecha operators in Mecha World was immense.

In one corner of the plaza, a line of standard advanced mecha were seated in a row on the ground. They were all seated in the same position, their chins propped on their hands. Five mecha in the exact same stance stood out quite a bit — they were obviously part of the same mecha clan. This caused the other surrounding mecha to stare from the corner of their eyes, filled with envy; quite a number of mecha even

semi-casually strolled by before them, hoping to attract the five mecha's attention.

This was because three mecha were all that was needed to form a mecha squad, while six mecha could form a miniature battle clan. The unaffiliated mecha were all guessing whether the five mecha were looking for a final member before going for the mission to establish their battle clan. Regardless of whether they were or they weren't, as long as the possibility existed, all the unaffiliated mecha hoped that the final lucky one would be themselves.

Meanwhile, at this time, the private comms channel of the five mecha was extraordinarily lively.

"Ah ah ah, why isn't Boss here yet?" [Lingtian Combat]'s voice, that is, the hearty volume of Qi Long's throat, instantly drowned out the softer tones of the others' chatter.

"Boss said 1300 hours ¹. Right now, it's only 1247. There's still 13 minutes left. What are you impatient about?" As his sworn brother, Han Jijyun, who was called [Lingtian Abacus] in Mecha World, rebuked without mercy. When would this fellow be just a little more calm and composed like Boss? Only knowing how to fool outsiders with that earnest and sincere face of his.

"Can't you see I'm just excited?! We're about to make a battle clan now! I'm really looking forward to it, and we're going to have a few new people too!" At this point, Qi Long suddenly began to snicker.

This caused the faces of the others to spasm involuntarily. In particular, Li Shiyu's darkened expression emerged at the forefront of Luo Lang's mind. Once again, he could not help but lament silently for Li Shiyu. Who asked him to catch the eye of their boss... this was his fate!

Luo Lang's mind began to replay that scene which had happened back at the Military Medical Research Centre...



Entirely shrouded in cold air, Ling Lan heaved Qi Long, who was typically loud and brash but was currently curled up into a miserable ball of pain, over a shoulder and charged aggressively towards the Military Medical Research Centre with Luo Lang and

the others trailing behind her.

Luo Lang and the others actually did not know why Qi Long had suddenly fallen ill, but Boss Lan had said that it was time to seek out Li Shiyu. On the way, they learned of Boss Lan's objective for this excursion. He was planning to break the unspoken rule upheld all this time within the military academy — the rule which stated that the students of the Military Medical Research specialization were not to participate in any faction so they could maintain their neutrality.

Yes, Boss Lan, who was about to establish a battle clan ahead of time in Mecha World, was planning to bring the dux of the Military Medical Research specialization Li Shiyu into his clan. This seemingly impossible goal of Ling Lan's astounded Han Jijyun, Luo Lang, and the others. Yet, after their shock had faded, they were consumed with excitement. If Boss Lan actually succeeded, this would definitely be a grand feat! Only Boss Lan would dare to even think of something like this and actually do it... In their minds, as long as Boss Lan wanted to do it, nothing was impossible.

It had to be said that Ling Lan's many grand achievements had filled Han Jijyun, Luo Lang, and the others' confidence in her to the brim. They believed that it was impossible for their Boss Lan to fail.

Ling Lan strode right up to the doors of the Military Medical Research Centre, and without any pause to think, she sent the door flying open with a forceful kick.

A loud crash rang out. This abrupt scene along with the sudden loud crash caused all the staff and students of the military medicine specialization to instantly cower down in fear. They had mistakenly assumed that the school was being attacked by an unidentified enemy.

Luo Lang and the others following behind Ling Lan looked at the rampaging Ling Lan before them, who looked like he had crawled out from the depths of hell, and their bodies trembled uncontrollably. Despite knowing that the wrath of their boss was faked, right then, they too were affected by the heavy aggression seeping out from their boss's body, cold sweat breaking out along their back.

In the Military Medical Research Centre, the only one still standing upright with a calm and fearless expression was their dux Li Shiyu. Expression stony, he stared at Ling Lan who had vandalised the doors of the centre and said through gritted teeth, "Ling Lan, are you insane? What do you take this place for?"

"Insane? You should rejoice that I'm not insane, just a little bit angry... or else, I won't be able to guarantee what I'll do. Li Shiyu, I trusted you, but how have you repaid this trust of mine? Once, twice, my brothers have been presented with problems because of your treatment. Shouldn't you be giving me an explanation? Hm?" said Ling Lan coldly. Her icy gaze and these words instantly doused the rage in Li Shiyu's heart.

"What are you trying to say? What's happened this time?" said Li Shiyu with a slight frown, resigned. Right now, he rather regretted agreeing to rescue Ling Lan's brothers back then out of a moment of soft-hearted weakness. Now it seemed as if this punk had latched onto him — whenever anything happened to Ling Lan's brothers, the other just loved to come and trouble him. In spite of Ling Lan's extremely discourteous attitude, Li Shiyu did not lose his composure, still calmly asking Ling Lan about the situation.

A trace of approval flashed across Ling Lan's cool gaze. As a military doctor, one needed to be level-headed in extreme situations. Even when facing a teammate's doubts and critique, they must be able to calmly explain their thought process and the sequence of events. Only then would they be able to obtain their teammates' trust. Undoubtedly, Li Shiyu was doing this extremely well — as expected of a prodigy of military medicine. For him, expending all this time and effort was worth it.

Ling Lan tamped down on the approval in her heart, and continued to say with a frigid expression, "Setting aside Luo Lang's relapse, I would never have expected the same thing to happen to Qi Long after his recovery. Dux Li, you owe me an explanation." Her words had barely faded when Ling Lan came to stand before Li Shiyu, where she then set down the suffering Qi Long and indicated for Li Shiyu to take a look.

Ling Lan's words made Li Shiyu's fair face flush bright red instantly. This horrible junior actually doubted his treatment abilities again and again... this was definitely an insult to his professionalism. No matter how calm and composed Li Shiyu was, he could not help but feel rage surging into his chest.

Even so, Li Shiyu was unable to refuse Qi Long treatment. As long as a patient was before him, as a military doctor, he needed to cast aside all personal enmity and save the patient to the best of his ability. He quickly stepped forward and gripped Qi Long's hand, feeling at his pulse point. And then, Li Shiyu's countenance shifted slightly once more — he had actually sensed the customary reaction from using the gene agent S-modification they had developed from the reading of Qi Long's pulse. Cold sweat instantly broke out all over Li Shiyu's body — could it be that the gene agent S-

modification still retained some problematic side issues? But their previous trials had not revealed any sign of this sort of situation?

Li Shiyu was rather uncertain now. He immediately asked the staff to lay Qi Long into a healing pod and treated Qi Long with special restorative agents. Initially shivering uncontrollably from the pain, Qi Long's tortured expression began to ease slowly after 10 or so seconds of this treatment. It looked like the restorative agent was effective.

"I want to know. What medical agent did you give my brothers exactly? Why would such a situation occur?" Ling Lan saw Qi Long's condition turn for the better and the ice on her face thawed considerably. Her tone and demeanour when asking Li Shiyu this was clearly a little warmer.

Li Shiyu was silent for a moment before he answered, "Once his condition is better, I will conduct a comprehensive examination on him. Only at that time will I know what the true reason for this is."

That said, Li Shiyu no longer paid any attention to Ling Lan. He immediately contacted the few specialization instructors he worked with. When his instructors heard of Qi Long's reaction, they were instantly anxious, agreeing to come over immediately so they could study this unique case together.

Ling Lan heard Li Shiyu calling for his instructors to come study together, and despite being as calm as ever on the surface, her heart could not help but pound and feel ill at ease.

Little Four sensed Ling Lan's concern and immediately piped up to reassure her, "*Boss, please don't worry. I have found all their data on the gene agent S-modification. After purifying and improving the gene agents daddy secretly brought us this time, the medical properties of the agents are definitely the same as their gene agent S-modification. They will never discover or suspect anything.*" While saying this, Little Four's tone was extremely proud. With regards to the purification of gene agents, there was absolutely no one who could beat him, Little Four.

Ling Lan relaxed with Little Four's assured guarantee. Frankly, even if she was still worried, it was too late to do anything about it now. The arrow had already been notched and the bow pulled taut, they could only fire the arrow. At this point, even if their scheme was seen through by the opponent, they could only grit their teeth and lie all the way.

Therefore, Ling Lan continued to stand there with a cold expression. Meanwhile, Luo Lang and the others were really unsure what was happening with Qi Long, so there was no expression other than worry on their faces. Li Shiyu, who had been silently observing them, felt fear creeping over him. Could it be that Qi Long's condition was real? Was it really the fault of their research centre?

Very soon, the instructors had all arrived. In the meantime, Qi Long's condition had improved considerably; he was no longer in the agonizing pain he had been in at the start. Subsequently, the instructors began to do all sorts of tests on Qi Long — those who drew blood, drew blood, while those who ran numbers, ran numbers. The reports were out very quickly. They discovered that all the reactions Qi Long were displaying were definitely in line with the customary reaction from injecting the gene agent S-modification.

This diagnosis caused their complexions to pale drastically. Could it be that this gene agent S-modification actually had a latency period and would trigger and break out every so often? This was undoubtedly a very serious latent issue, proving that their gene agent S-modification was greatly flawed.

Chapter 306

Joining!

The instructors were all silent in the face of these reports. They only began discussing the reports in hushed voices after a good long while. After conversing for a while with his instructors, Li Shiyu clenched his teeth and walked over to stand before Ling Lan and apologised, "Our medical agents have been used before by countless people, and none of them have ever presented with a situation like Qi Long's. This could very well be due to his special physical constitution. Still, whatever the case, this is our error. I'm sorry, Ling Lan."

"You can save the apology. All I want to know is whether this will cause problems for Qi Long in the future?" Ling Lan's cold gaze pierced right through Li Shiyu, as if warning Li Shiyu not to even think about bluffing his way through.

"I don't know. Because this is a unique case, never having occurred before, I cannot tell if Qi Long will present with a similar situation in future. What I can confirm is that this agent will not harm Qi Long's body permanently in any way. In fact, you could say that even if it acts up in the future, it will only bring benefits and no harm."

Frankly, Li Shiyu really wanted to say 'no, this is just an outlier case', but out of responsibility to his patient, Li Shiyu just could not utter those words. This was because he himself could not say for certain whether this situation of Qi Long's was just a one-time thing or if it would be a reoccurring issue all his life — after all, this condition of Qi Long's was truly just too bizarre; no one could say anything definite about it at present.

Hearing this, Ling Lan's raging aura rose once more. She gripped Li Shiyu by the front of his white robe, pulled him close before her, and said with a murderous expression, "What do you mean by 'will not harm him permanently in any way'? What is this 'every time it acts up it'll only bring benefit'? Do you know that Qi Long will have to go onto a battlefield in future? If this kind of situation happens during regular times, we can still send him straight to a doctor for treatment. But what if it happens to break out during a battle? On the battlefield, any bit of error could cost him his life. Do you think that if this happens in that situation, Qi Long can survive?"

Ling Lan's blunt questioning left Li Shiyu's mouth twitching helplessly. Indeed, the scenario Ling Lan had described could very well happen. If the agent acted up on the battlefield, the only fate that awaited Qi Long was death — the enemy would not wait for Qi Long to get over this brief period of incapacitation.

Remorse sprang up in Li Shiyu's heart. Although his intentions had been good, thinking to give his younger cousin's friends a small boost in power, who could have expected that this agent would not be suitable for people of all physical constitutions...? All their previous tests and trials had actually missed out on finding this flaw in the agent.

At this time, one of the instructors walked over. Extremely apologetic, he said, "I am sorry. The reaction of this student to the agent is something we've never seen before. This agent of ours has already been used on countless hundred thousands of people, and none have ever exhibited the side-effects this student has. This might be a special case, but it cannot be denied that this is an error on the part of our Military Medical Research Centre. We will take responsibility for it. Please raise any requests you may have as long as it's within our means."

At these words, Ling Lan released her grip on Li Shiyu's chest and replied evenly, "Requests? I only have one request, and that is that my brother cannot lose his life because of this agent. As long as you all can resolve this, I can pretend as if nothing had happened..."

Ling Lan's request caused the instructor's expression to become troubled. "I am sorry. Cadet, right now, we have not yet developed an agent which can alleviate the symptoms of this reaction instantaneously. You might have to wait for some time..."

The instructor could not promise anything. After all, they had always thought that this reaction would only occur right after injection. Once the patient bore it till the end, the agent would be done with its work. They had never had to consider how to alleviate these reaction symptoms, because only by riding through this agonizing pain would the patient's body benefit fully. At most, they would just do as they were doing for Qi Long now, adding a little restorative agent into the mix to restore a little of the patient's stamina and spiritual power to help the patient hang on through the pain...

"How long do we have to wait? One year? Two years? Three years? Or perhaps five years? Ten years? Perhaps even longer?" A trace of mockery hung on Ling Lan's lips. The disdain in her eyes made the instructor somewhat disgruntled, but he had no way

to rebut what Ling Lan had said. The instructors of the military medicine specialization had always based everything they said and did by the data — with regards to something they had yet to research, they truly could not give a specific time frame. It was as Ling Lan said; they might need 8 or 10 years to come up with an answer.

"Could it be that you want my brother to constantly be under threat of death during this period while you all are researching a solution? Any unfortunate mishap, and he could become the first death caused by your agent?" asked Ling Lan with a sneer.

"No, we have no intentions of letting that happen. If possible, we can give military headquarters a report so that Cadet Qi Long can be exempted from the battlefield and become a support staff officer..." the instructor hurried to explain, stating a short-term suggestion they could think of.

"Sir, do you know what our specialization is? We are from the Mecha Piloting specialization. The reason we chose this specialization is because we want to fight on the frontlines of the battlefield and not hide at the back like a coward. Your suggestion is without question an insult to both me and my brother," barked Ling Lan in response to his words.

Ling Lan's furious demeanour deepened the instructor's remorse; he too felt he had misspoken. He quickly asked, "Then, what do you want?"

Ling Lan swept an icy glare around the Military Medical Research Centre, and everyone there instinctively ducked their heads, avoiding eye contact. At this moment, everyone present had become suppressed by Ling Lan's cold and domineering force of presence, including those rational-minded instructors.

Then, Ling Lan was heard to say measuredly, "I hope for a military doctor who has graduated from the Military Medical Research specialization to join my battle clan to watch over my brothers' physical condition in the long run. Because, after accepting your treatment, other than the current patient Qi Long, there is still my other brother Luo Lang!" Ling Lan pointed at Luo Lang standing behind her and continued, "Right now, I cannot confirm whether the same condition will present itself in this brother of mine. After all, after undergoing treatment here, he has suffered a relapse before."

Ling Lan's gaze met Li Shiyu's as she spoke, and Li Shiyu's forehead creased slightly in a small frown. Regarding Luo Lang's injuries, Li Shiyu was extremely certain that the

centre was not at fault. However, they did not have any persuasive proof otherwise at the moment, so they could only silently bear the blame.

"As Dux Li was the one who caused all this, being responsible for treating my two brothers, I hope for Dux Li to shoulder this responsibility and become a member of my battle clan to watch over the wellbeing of my clan members." Ling Lan finally revealed her true objective.

"No, this is impossible. Cadets from the military medicine specializations are not allowed to join any battle clans. This is an academy regulation," the instructor refused vehemently. Mind you, all the students trained by the military medicine specializations in the academy would end up as outstanding elite doctors of the medical world. As such, they needed to be available to serve the army as a whole and not be tied down to a small battle clan — that would be such a huge waste of talent. Especially in the case of Li Shiyu — he was the most outstanding prodigy of their specialization. The instructors all had high hopes for him, hoping that he would ultimately become the greatest hand of god of the military medicine world one day. This prodigy they had invested so much time and effort in cultivating... how could they bear to hand him over to some small battle clan?

"Sir, as far as I know, the academy does not have this rule in black and white. At most, this is just a mutual agreement and tradition of this school. You should know that any rule that is not clearly stated is not inviolable. And the fact of the matter is that my two brothers have presented with problems at Dux Li's hands. According to rule 68 subsection 21 of the academy's rules: when an accidental incident occurs (including events such as fights and tournaments, medical cases, risky research studies, etcetera), whoever is responsible for the damages will be the one held responsible for reparation. Based on this regulation, my request is not asking for too much." Ling Lan read the regulation Little Four had dug up for her, and then asked the instructor sharply, "Is the Military Medical Research Centre trying to brush off this responsibility? Or perhaps you all want to go against this regulation?"

"No, that's not it. This... this..." Under Ling Lan's aggressive questioning, the instructor was actually rendered speechless. He looked at Li Shiyu, then looked back again at the dogged Ling Lan, and was instantly as anxious as an ant on a hot plate ¹, completely at a loss what to do.

The other instructors saw that things were looking bad — they quickly turned on their communicators and secretly contacted the faculty head of the military medicine

specialization, hoping that he would hurry over and resolve this sudden incident. As Li Shiyu's instructors, they did not wish for Li Shiyu to be limited to developing in a small battle clan.

Right at that moment, Li Shiyu, who had been calmly contemplating for a long while, suddenly shouted, "I, am willing to take responsibility!"

Li Shiyu felt that Ling Lan was right. Leaving the matter of Luo Lang aside, Qi Long's condition today was indeed the fault of their Military Medical Research Centre. And since the one who had requested for Qi Long to be given the gene agent S-modification was him, Li Shiyu, he really had no grounds to deflect this responsibility.

Of course, Li Shiyu had initially hoped to enter the best treatment department after graduating, to learn more about more obscure medical arts, treatments, and agents, and study them in depth. Because this way, he would have an even greater chance of curing that bizarre illness of his eldest cousin brother ². However, he did not want to evade responsibility. Since Qi Long had suffered as a result of his actions, he was willing to use his own future to compensate for this burden of guilt.

Li Shiyu mentally apologised to his eldest cousin brother in his heart, because this decision of his would undoubtedly cause his cousin to suffer for a little longer. Still, he believed that as long as he worked hard to learn and research, even though it might take him a little longer, he was still confident that he would eventually be able to fully cure that feeble body of his cousin. It was precisely due to this unshakeable confidence that Li Shiyu would shoulder this responsibility so readily.

Hearing Li Shiyu's resolute answer, Ling Lan mentally pumped a fist in her heart with a loud cheer of '*YES, Success!*'

After expending all that effort, she had finally snatched this prodigy for her battle clan. Even though her methods were rather despicable, in order to guarantee the lives and safety of her brothers, she would even stoop to even more despicable means. Ling Lan did not regret her actions in the least. She was not a saintly matron — she could not care for the entire Federation army; she could only care for these brothers by her side.

Thus, when Ling Lan looked at Li Shiyu, her gaze was placid and self-assured with not one hint of remorse within it. Ling Lan firmly believed that — Heaven destroys those who don't look out for themselves. This classic line which had been preserved through the ages certainly could not be wrong.

Soon after, the faculty head rushed over, only to hear that the two sides had already come to an agreement. Li Shiyu had agreed to join Ling Lan's battle clan. The head was instantly racked with heartache. However, faced with a resolute Li Shiyu, he could not convince the other to change his mind. In the end, the faculty head could only plead with Ling Lan to promise that he would not leak the news of Li Shiyu joining his battle clan. The faculty head did not wish for the other excellent students his specialization was cultivating with such care to be taken away by even more battle clans...

Ling Lan's objective had been achieved, so she naturally would not refuse this entreaty of the faculty head. She agreed without hesitation. Just like this, Ling Lan's battle clan was the first ever to include a student from the military medicine specialization in its ranks, and it would also be the only battle clan to possess a military doctor. Meanwhile, at this time, Li Shiyu was unaware, but the curtains of his very own legend were about to be raised ³.

Chapter 307

Battle Clan Members!

Although the other five members of Ling Lan's team were sympathetic towards Li Shiyu, who at present appeared to be extremely tragic and innocent in all this, they were still deeply impressed by their boss's grand feat this time. He had actually managed to tie Li Shiyu to their battle force.

After all, having such an exceptional military doctor like Li Shiyu in their battle clan meant their lives had an additional layer of protection when they entered the battlefield. Ling Lan had undoubtedly given them an extra protective life-saving talisman. At this thought, Qi Long and the other four were filled with even more gratitude and respect for Boss Lan.

As for the two other new members Boss Lan had mentioned, Qi Long and the others did not know much. They only knew that one of them was a mecha mechanic, while the other was a mecha operator who was a primary attacker.

Just when the time was about to hit 1300¹, Lin Zhong-qing, who had been observing the surroundings all this time, suddenly yelled out in the comms channel, "Stop the chitchat. Boss is coming!"

The busily chatting group instantly fell silent, all of them turning their heads to look for the figure of their boss. Coming in diagonally from the right before them, three mecha were swiftly approaching. Two of the three were intermediate mecha, while the last was an advanced mecha.

"Of the two intermediate mecha, one of them should be Boss's," remarked Lin Zhong-qing. As the one who communicated most often with Boss Lan, he was well aware of the current level of Ling Lan's mecha.

He had barely finished speaking when the three mecha came to a stop before them. The five of them received a private message from Ling Lan almost simultaneously, requesting for them to join her party. When Qi Long received the message, he immediately disbanded their previous party of five. Right afterwards, he received Ling Lan's party invitation.

[No Mecha Unrepaired] saw the standardised names with 'Lingtian' before them — [Lingtian Combat], [Lingtian Abacus], [Lingtian Parcel], [Lingtian Razor] ², [Lingtian Substitute] — scrolling rapidly across his screen as they joined [Lingtian First-String]'s battle clan one after the other, and his heart was instantly overcome with emotion.

Not too long ago, he had still been worrying over his future because he did not know whether he would be accepted by any battle clan. The grudge between him and the Thunder King had been major news at one point in Mecha World — skilled battle clans that knew about this past history would very likely be unwilling to accept him in order to avoid offending the Thunder King, who was powerful and influential inside Mecha World.

Meanwhile, if he wanted to graduate from the military academy, he would need to join a battle clan. Otherwise, he would not be able to complete those courses which required one. Just as he was at a loss, [No Mecha Unrepaired] had been surprised by [Lingtian First-String] initiating contact. The other had asked him outright if he would be interested to join the other's clan.

This was undoubtedly a straw to clutch at for [No Mecha Unrepaired]. His first reflex was to agree immediately, but luckily, he was still somewhat rational. After calming down, he began to consider the consequences of joining. He could not bring trouble to someone who had helped him before, even though [Lingtian First-String] was indeed very strong.

Thus, [No Mecha Unrepaired] asked [Lingtian First-String] why the other had invited him to join. He also asked if [Lingtian First-String] knew the consequences of inviting him to join. This would certainly offend the Thunder King's faction and may impact the development of [Lingtian First-String]'s battle clan in the future.

Unexpectedly, [Lingtian First-String] only responded with two words, "So what?"

Even as [No Mecha Unrepaired] was touched by this, he was utterly speechless. He then asked [Lingtian First-String] — could it be that he did not want his battle clan to develop properly? It should be known that with a powerful faction applying pressure on them and seeking trouble at every turn, perhaps even interrupting and obstructing them in all of their missions, the other's battle clan would never be able to develop. The clan would only be able to barely survive under the abuse of the Thunder King's faction... [No Mecha Unrepaired] believed that this was not something [Lingtian First-

String] wanted to see.

To his surprise, [Lingtian First-String] did not answer his question, instead asking him in return whether he dared to fight with him.

[Lingtian First-String] did not say that he was not afraid of the Thunder King, nor any other empty words like they would be fine as long as they distanced themselves from the Thunder King's faction. He simply asked [No Mecha Unrepaired] whether he would fight, proving that the other had long considered the severe repercussions of inviting [No Mecha Unrepaired] into his battle clan. This meant that the other's invitation was not an impulsive act but a decision made after deep contemplation.

Upon hearing this question of [Lingtian First-String]'s, [No Mecha Unrepaired] no longer hesitated, agreeing readily. [No Mecha Unrepaired] still recalled how his tears had fallen uncontrollably at the moment he accepted. Perhaps his heart had already become fatigued from resisting the Thunder King's faction alone for so long. The sudden appearance of a friend who was willing to fight by his side was like a shot of heart tonic to him — he had hope once again. [No Mecha Unrepaired] silently made a vow. If he and [Lingtian First-String] truly managed to overcome this hurdle, he would serve [Lingtian First-String]'s battle clan for the rest of his life. Only comrades who were willing to share their burdens and brave trials together were worthy of a lifetime of dedication.

[No Mecha Unrepaired] was well aware that if no battle clan invited him, he would ultimately only have two paths before him. One was to retain his dignity and drop out of school resentfully in the end, while the other was to bow his proud head, break his proud bones, and give up on his dignity to become a subordinate of the Thunder King... of these two paths, he did not want either of them, and [Lingtian First-String]'s invitation was undoubtedly a third path of salvation from a desperate situation... Although the future of this third path was vague and uncertain, [No Mecha Unrepaired] was willing to take the risk and fight.

"[No Mecha Unrepaired] shall be the future mecha mechanic of our battle clan. From now on, if you all have any problems with your mecha, you can look for him directly," Ling Lan pointed at [No Mecha Unrepaired], who was lost in his thoughts, and introduced him to the others.

"Oh, so you're that [No Mecha Unrepaired] who had been pressured so much by the Thunder King that you've been driven to a corner..." [Lingtian Substitute], who was

Xie Yi, was the first to exclaim in realisation.

As the public representative of the team dealing with external relations, Xie Yi had always been collecting all information generated within the military academy. He naturally knew quite a lot about [No Mecha Unrepaired]'s matter, even knowing [No Mecha Unrepaired]'s true name in the real world. However, right now they were only a virtual battle clan in Mecha World, and Xie Yi was unsure whether [No Mecha Unrepaired] was to be a permanent member or a member under temporary contract — so, before Boss Lan explicitly defined the other's status within the clan, Xie Yi would still cautiously call [No Mecha Unrepaired] by his username in Mecha World.

"Ah, you all know about that too...?" asked [No Mecha Unrepaired] with a wry chuckle. He had not expected his story to have become so widespread.

"Yes. Trapped in the newbie town for close to 3 years, never succeeding in stepping out of the town by even one step... your story has been widely discussed on the Mecha World official forums. I just happened to see it," replied Xie Yi with a smile.

"Looks like, after almost 3 years, the Thunder King still has no intention of letting me be," said [No Mecha Unrepaired] with a troubled expression, "I'm very grateful for [Lingtian First-String]'s invitation to join your team. However, now that you all know as well that the Thunder King is still unwilling to leave me alone till today, once I join the battle clan, great trouble is sure to follow. If you all disagree on my joining due to this, it's still not too late."

"Why would we disagree? What Boss has decided, we will of course uphold," [Lingtian Razor], a.k.a. ³ Luo Lang, responded instantly.

"[Lingtian First-String] is your boss?" [No Mecha Unrepaired] exclaimed in shock. He would never have guessed that [Lingtian First-String], who operated an intermediate mecha just like him, would actually be the boss of this bunch of advanced mecha warriors. However, [No Mecha Unrepaired]'s surprise quickly faded, because he recalled how astoundingly strong [Lingtian First-String] had been even when he had just been operating a rabbit trainee mecha. Perhaps the other had just not upgraded to a better mecha for some reason. [No Mecha Unrepaired] began to construct endless idealisations around [Lingtian First-String] — no one would be willing to believe that the formidable [Lingtian First-String] was in fact truly just an intermediate mecha warrior in Mecha World...

"This here is [Priceless Kinship], our future doctor," said Ling Lan tonelessly, pointing at [Priceless Kinship]; this introduction was much less meticulous and serious than when she had introduced [No Mecha Unrepaired].

[No Mecha Unrepaired] took a peek at [Priceless Kinship], who was as silent as ever despite hearing [Lingtian First-String]'s simple introduction. Even though he had rushed here together with the other, [Lingtian First-String] had not introduced them to each other prior to this. The whole way here, [Priceless Kinship] had not made a peep — he seemed rather cold and hard to get along with. [No Mecha Unrepaired] wondered silently whether the other was like him, only having been invited by [Lingtian First-String] to join the battle clan recently. This was because the other's name was like his, not beginning with 'Lingtian'.

In contrast to the enthusiasm with which they had welcomed [No Mecha Unrepaired], after hearing [Lingtian First-String]'s introduction, the five other people there abruptly fell silent. After that, several muttered welcomes rang out within the comms channel, sounding somewhat perfunctory, or perhaps dispirited and uncertain. And the final rather awkward welcome came from [Lingtian Combat].

"Brother Kinship ⁴, this junior's body is in your care now. But please don't let any other accidents occur..." Closely following that welcome was a short speech by [Lingtian Combat]. There was a trace of forced cheer in his tone and also a trace of lingering fear — this made [No Mecha Unrepaired] glance curiously at [Priceless Kinship]. Could it be that there was some deeper secret behind his joining?

Hearing [Lingtian Combat]'s words, the initially rather cold and detached [Priceless Kinship] instantly responded seriously, "I will not make the same mistake twice. Please do not worry." Towards the one he had wronged, Li Shiyu could no longer maintain his aloofness even though he was not particularly pleased with the clan leader Ling Lan.

At this moment, [Lingtian Abacus], a.k.a. Han Jijyun, seemed to sense the awkward atmosphere, and so quickly changed the topic to ask, "Boss, didn't you say there were three new recruits? Where's the last one?"

Ling Lan replied, "I've already notified him to come over."

She had barely finished speaking when an advanced mecha could be seen flying here at high speed. It came to an abrupt stop before them without even slipping into a slide

step from the inertia. This move completely proved just how skilful the other's control was, causing the eyes of Qi Long, Luo Lang, and the others to light up. They could tell at a glance that the other's control was definitely first-class — Qi Long, in particular, found competitive spirit flaring up in his heart. He really wished he could fight one match with the other immediately to see who was stronger.

Everyone in the party quickly saw a notification appear on their own mecha's screens: [Self-Defined Destiny] has joined team Lingtian.

"[Self-Defined Destiny], another member of our battle clan. A mecha operator, he is a combat member," Ling Lan introduced. Everyone greeted [Self-Defined Destiny] warmly. Only Han Jijyun subtly quirked a brow even as he greeted the other, because he had sensed something different in the way his boss had introduced [Self-Defined Destiny]. Even though his boss's tone had been as dispassionate as usual, Han Jijyun had still picked up a subtle difference — this made Han Jijyun begin to take careful note of [Self-Defined Destiny].

[Self-Defined Destiny] saw five others who had the same start to their names as [Lingtian First-String] and knew that these five people must be the most stable and permanent members of the Lingtian Battle Clan. He quickly greeted them warmly in return, though he was equally earnest in greeting [No Mecha Unrepaired] and [Priceless Kinship]. Since he truly wanted to integrate himself into the Lingtian Battle Clan, then he needed to establish a good relationship with every member. On this front, Li Lanfeng did not dare to slack off.

Chapter 308

Accepting a Mission!

In this first meeting, Qi Long and the other four as well as [No Mecha Unrepaired] all felt that [Self-Defined Destiny] was a pretty decent guy. His demeanour was warm and gentle, making others feel as if graced by a spring breeze. Only [Priceless Kinship], a.k.a. Li Shiyu, was still a little puzzled, because the other's aura gave him a sense of familiarity and affinity, just like how Li Lanfeng had made him feel back when they first met...

Li Shiyu could not help but mentally shake his head, laughing at himself for being a little too sensitive. Perhaps this person was just a pleasant-tempered person like Li Lanfeng, which was why he would give him this feeling of similarity... Li Shiyu knew well that the reason he was so attuned to this sort of aura was that his eldest cousin brother radiated the exact same type of aura. His eldest cousin brother just could not become a mecha operator in reality like Li Lanfeng, nor could he enter Mecha World to become an advanced mecha warrior like [Self-Defined Destiny].

Although Mecha World was a virtual world, its advancement levels also drew from the true physical condition of the players in real life. If one's physical constitution in the real world did not meet the standards for advancement, one would also be unable to successfully advance in the virtual world.

Thus, Li Shiyu had never even considered the possibility that his eldest cousin brother might have entered Mecha World and become an advanced mecha warrior. This type of habitual thinking caused him to miss this earliest opportunity of discovering the truth. It was only many years later when he would come to realise that he had actually already touched upon the truth from the very beginning — he had merely brushed it aside.

After the few of them got to know one another, Ling Lan led them in a sprint towards the manor of the city lord of Grandsweep City. That was the place where one could accept the mission to build a battle clan. Ling Lan wanted to complete this mission today.

In the square, all the unaffiliated mecha operators watched as the team sprinted

towards the city lord's manor, and they could pretty much confirm that the party was on their way to build a battle clan. They could not help but sigh... why could they not be one of the members in that party?

One mecha operator who could not abide seeing others do well could not help but curse them silently in his heart, *"I hope their luck is bad and they don't get a mission..."*

In Mecha World, the mission to establish a battle clan was not that easy to obtain. At present, the sources for these missions as posted on the official forums were truly all kinds of strange ¹, different in so many ways. Some could be accepted directly from the city lord, with some of those being received at the official hall of the city lord's manor. There was even one battle clan which had been oddball enough to receive the mission from the janitor at the city lord's manor, while there were also clans that visited the manor multiple times to no avail... not only that, the missions received also varied in difficulty. Some battle clans had a burst of great luck, managing to receive a supremely easy mission. It could be as easy as merely having to deliver a letter to obtain the clan formation token, thus successfully building one's battle clan. In contrast, there were some missions which were loaded with challenges — they might not be completed even after many attempts where the clan members would be wiped out again and again.

Thus from jealousy sprung hate — the unaffiliated players without a battle clan could not help but be resentful, hoping that these teams which qualified to establish battle clans would fail in their missions.

After speaking with the mecha operator guarding the gates of the city lord's manor, they found out that only the team leader could enter to accept the mission. So Ling Lan asked the others to wait for her at the gates before speaking with the mecha operator once more to choose the option of establishing a battle clan. The next second, she was transported into the city lord's manor. The moment one entered the manor, one would automatically be ejected from one's mecha to appear with one's regular appearance. Otherwise, the large hulking mecha would certainly have destroyed the city lord's manor.

The location one was transported to was utterly random, just like the way one could receive a mission. The place Ling Lan came to was a corridor. Ling Lan could not help but frown — the best spot to be transported to was the great hall of the manor. That way, it would be much more convenient to find the official hall or the city lord's office, and the success rate of obtaining a mission would be much higher. In contrast, it was

hard to tell with this corridor, because you would not be able to tell which doorway you should choose. This was completely a test of luck.

But was it truly just a test of luck? ² Ling Lan did not rush to look for a way out, instead standing where she had landed to think things through rationally.

Common sense would dictate that there should not be that many restrictions in the way of forming a battle clan. After all, the formation of a battle clan would band unaffiliated mecha operators together, greatly cultivating the cooperation and rapport between mecha operators, which would bring more potential out of the mecha operators within a clan. It could be said that for this type of battle clan that was established early, when enlisting as a clan into an army division, they could clearly skip the period new troops needed to acclimatise to work with one another. They could become an extremely efficient battle unit in a very short period of time.

Without question, this was an excellent model to foster a nation of soldiers. At critical junctures, even the common public could swiftly turn into extremely capable old hands at fighting, equipped with the ability to work in groups to boot.

In that case, why would such a brilliant model have so many restrictions placed on it? With even the process of accepting the clan-formation mission being so abstruse? Ling Lan could not help but recall the associated tests back during the enrolment for the scout academy and the military academy. A flash of insight coursed through her mind — could this also be a type of test? However, the ones being tested this time were them, the incipient clan leaders... what the Federation needed were exceptional leaders who could lead their team members to grow and develop together. Were they trying to weed out those applicant clan leaders who did not have the ability and were only here muddying the waters, to prevent them from destroying the futures of their clan members?

Thinking about it this way, everything made sense — it could be explained why there were so many restrictions involved in the formation of a battle clan now. Ling Lan even felt that those party leaders who were unable to obtain a mission were in fact not unlucky as most believed. After entering the city lord's manor, their choices and actions must have been evaluated by the mainframe of Mecha World and found unsuitable for the role of clan leader. Perhaps that's how they lost the right to receive the mission?

In other words, right when one entered the city lord's manor, the assessment for the

party leader had already begun!

At this point in her train of thought, Ling Lan could not help but sweatdrop. How much did this world love its hidden tests? Even when they were playing a game ³, they could not avoid this hurdle... Having reached this conclusion, Ling Lan naturally raised her guard up to 120%. After all, this would determine whether or not her battle clan could be formed. Even if she did not do it for herself, she would need to take responsibility on behalf of her followers and friends!

"Little Four, split the corridor into several smaller screens. Do not overlook any single small corner. I need to understand everything about this area," Ling Lan finally spoke up to give Little Four instructions.

Without demur, Little Four broke the image of the corridor into countless smaller images and displayed them to Ling Lan in her mindspace. Ling Lan began to study each picture carefully, clicking through them one by one. It didn't take long before she was done scrutinising all of the images.

Ling Lan's brow scrunched up tighter and tighter because she could not see anything strange on any of the images. It should be said that the corridor was absolutely normal. There were only two doorways — one was behind Ling Lan, so it should be the entrance, while the other was at the end of the corridor, so it should be the exit...

Am I just overthinking things? Ling Lan could not help but wonder. Suddenly thinking of something, she abruptly clicked back to one of the images. It was an image of one corner of the corridor — right beside it was a large flower garden, and there was a gardener busy at work inside.

For a person to randomly appear like that in the flower garden, just when she was looking to accept a mission, Ling Lan felt that this was very suspicious.

"Little Four, this gardener, investigate them for me," Ling Lan instructed Little Four as she pointed at the sweat-drenched gardener.

Little Four obeyed immediately, beginning to flip through and investigate everything he could about the existence of the gardener. In the end, he returned jubilantly, eyes sparkling as he looked at Ling Lan, to say adoringly, "Boss, it's as you suspected. There is a huge problem with this person." If not for his boss sensing something strange about the situation, Little Four, who had not thought of taking the initiative to

investigate, would have completely missed this opportunity to discover the truth.

At Little Four's response, Ling Lan's eyes lit up. "It's good as long as there is a problem. Who is he exactly?"

"He's no gardener. He's actually the lord of this manor, the city lord of Grandsweep City, Luo Yixuan," answered Little Four smugly. As long as it was something he wanted to find out, no matter how hard the Mecha World mainframe tried to conceal it, the information could never escape his keen fire-gold eyes ⁴.

"So, the clan-formation mission should be on him." The corner of Ling Lan's lips quirked. What a windfall... her luck was truly pretty good! Still, the mainframe of Mecha World was really quite despicable, actually disguising a city lord as a gardener. If she had not carefully studied the situation in the corridor, perhaps she might have walked all the way to the end and went off to god knows where. It was likely that she would not have ever obtained a mission then.

"For him to appear in this path you must go through to obtain a mission, Boss, and with the fact that he is the head here, that's probably close to the mark." Little Four agreed with Ling Lan's analysis, believing that the mission must be with the city lord.

Since she had found her target, Ling Lan quickly walked over to the gardener's side and silently waited for the gardener to finish up what he was doing. Ling Lan's patience was excellent, and she believed it was better not to disturb someone as they were working.

The gardener finished planting the tree sapling in his hands and was just turning around to pick up another sapling when he was startled greatly by Ling Lan standing behind him. His expression changed and he pointed at Ling Lan angrily and asked, "Hey, why are you standing behind me?! Don't you know that's very frightening?"

"Frightening? If you were a normal gardener, perhaps that might be true. But is Your Lordship really just an ordinary gardener?" said Ling Lan casually. Framed by that cold stony face of hers, it did not come off very friendly. However, Ling Lan was oblivious about this, because her demeanour when speaking was always like this regardless of whom she was speaking with.

"If I'm not an ordinary gardener, then who am I? You impudent punk. I must go report to the city lord and chase you out..." This seemingly impolite expression and tone of

Ling Lan instantly drove the gardener to anger.

Hearing this, Ling Lan's eyebrows lifted and the corner of her lips twitched up slightly. "Aren't you the city lord, Elder?" This expression of Ling Lan's was blatant mockery in the gardener's eyes. It seemed to be saying — was there really any point in this idiotic charade?

The gardener's expression instantly turned ugly as rage welled in his heart. Hells, this punk was truly too arrogant! Actually daring to laugh and mock me; not at all knowing how to respect his elders... and so, his impression of Ling Lan dropped straight from neutral to a negative value.

Poor Ling Lan had long become accustomed to sporting this frozen face of hers. In fact, that little tilt of her lips had been forcefully squeezed out by Ling Lan in hopes of improving the city lord's impression of her. She was hoping that this would prompt the city lord to swiftly assign her a mission, one that was not too hard. However, this effort of hers was destined to go to waste. Sometimes, the best intentions could in fact lead to even worse outcomes... just as it was with the current Ling Lan.

The gardener did not seem to want to give Ling Lan a mission. Even though Ling Lan had already uncovered his true identity, he still pretended he had heard nothing. He simply asked Ling Lan to leave the garden so she would not disturb his work.

Chapter 309

SSS-Rank!

Out of options, Ling Lan could only say outright, "City Lord Luo Yixuan, I am here to receive a clan-formation mission. Let's not beat around the bush anymore and stop wasting each other's time."

Hearing Ling Lan call out his name directly, the city lord Luo Yixuan knew for sure that his identity had been seen through by the other. Because to the general outside world, his information was only listed as the city lord of Grandsweep City; his full name would not be displayed. It was very likely that the other had found some other clue to his identity from some other source. This also made it so that he could not continue to hold back from giving out the clan-formation mission.

Yet he did not want to make things so easy for this arrogant and impolite punk. An idea struck him and he instantly brought out a large spin wheel and said coldly, "I can give you a mission if you want, but whether or not you can actually receive one will all depend on your luck."

Ling Lan looked at that familiar large spin wheel once more, but this time, its segments were not marked with various mecha but with various mission options for forming a clan. More than half of the segments were labelled with the word 'failure' outright — she could just tell that this was the city lord Luo Yixuan's doing. She thought back on the two times she had spun a rabbit mecha and could not help but cringe inside. What if her spinning luck was bad here...

Ling Lan was not really worried about the failures, because if she received a 'failure', she could just wait till a week later to try and receive a mission again. She glanced briefly at that terrifying SSS-rank mission on one of the segments in the spin wheel and could not help but gulp silently. Hells, if her spin landed on that, it would definitely be even more tragic than getting a 'failure'. As far as she knew, no one had ever completed an SSS-rank mission up till now... she did not want to spend her entire life struggling with this mission.

"What? If you're afraid, you can just choose to give up directly and just come again next week," said the city lord Luo Yixuan coldly, arms folded across his chest.

Damm*t, her luck could not be that bad all the time! Ling Lan would never choose to give up voluntarily; she decisively pressed down on the handle of the large spin wheel. The spin wheel began to spin rapidly — Ling Lan pressed her lips tightly together, praying in her heart for the SSS-rank mission to stay away... and the large spin wheel finally stopped.

Ling Lan first reflex was to stare down at her own hand. Her hand was obviously so white and soft... why was her hand-luck so black then?! She even began to curse herself — why did she even think about the SSS-rank mission while the wheel had been spinning? Didn't she know how the more she didn't want something, the more likely it was to come?

Ling Lan had no tears even though she felt like crying. She could not help but sigh loudly at the skies. Reality proved that she was natural enemies with large spin wheels — in the end, the needle firmly pointed at a mission of SSS-rank. Ling Lan's first thought was whether she should just choose to give up and come again next week.

However, before Ling Lan could decide, the city lord, who had been equally stunned by the results, very quickly came to himself. Chortling sinisterly, he withdrew a token from a pocket and threw it into Ling Lan's lap, and then... he immediately ran away.

Amidst the schadenfreude-filled laughter of the city lord which had yet to fade, Ling Lan stared speechlessly down at the mission token in her hands, a green vein spasming uncontrollably at her temple... no matter how much the city lord did not like her, he still could not be so irresponsible as to just dump the mission token on her and leave! At the very least he should give her a mission introduction and offer some useful tips or suggestions... what an extremely irresponsible NPC! Ling Lan decided that she would definitely submit a complaint about this city lord of Grandsweep City. An NPC just could not be that shameless.

With no other recourse, Ling Lan could only try to get more information from the token in her hands. She had just straightened the token when a notification popped up on a virtual screen before her.

"Clan-formation mission, mission ranking: SSS-rank. Mission content: A month ago, Fleet Swift Dragon, which is stationed at the Nebula Boundary, sent over an extremely subtle S.O.S. As the message was too brief, the Federation military was unable to determine whether it was a mistake or a true request for assistance. Although headquarters sent a team over to investigate, they did not discover anything out of the ordinary. Despite

everything looking normal, the Federation military is not completely convinced. They have decided to secretly send an unofficial civilian expedition to look around the Nebula Boundary to find out once and for all what the S.O.S. was about. Upon completion of the mission, the Federation shall convey the official status of battle clan on the expedition team. The team will from then on be granted the same rights and benefits as military troops of the same rank..."

"As expected of an SSS-rank mission. How troublesome." Reading the mission introduction, Ling Lan's mood became very horrible. This mission was not easy. One, the people they were supposed to contact were unclear. Two, the situation at the Nebula Boundary was unclear. Three, as a civilian expedition party, entering a location controlled by the Federation military... that was definitely seeking death. Any random person within a trained fleet would be able to drown their entire expedition team with just a mouthful of spit.

Moreover, how they could covertly get to the Nebula Boundary was also an extremely difficult matter. In short, this mission was already extremely tricky from the very beginning, and the further they progressed, the harder things would be. Also, Ling Lan did not believe that military headquarters would really just send them, this one team. It was highly likely that while they were acting, the military would also send another investigative team to secretly sneak into the Nebula Boundary to investigate. At the bottom of it all, they were just the diversionary lure to draw away the guard troops of the Nebula Boundary.

"Perhaps, giving up would be better for us." Ling Lan felt that this mission was absolutely impossible at the level of her current party.

Ling Lan was not someone who was blindly confident. When the difficulty of a mission was truly worlds apart from her team's capabilities, Ling Lan would rationally choose to give up. She did not want to lead her companions into danger recklessly. Even though dying in the game would not lead to true death, Ling Lan was worried that this would instill the habit of risk-taking within herself. This character trait was undesirable as it could very well hurt everyone in the real world. Ling Lan was constantly on guard against it.

Having come to a decision, Ling Lan instantly threw the token onto the ground without any hesitation. In Mecha World, whether it was equipment, resources, medical agents, or materials, as long as it was dumped somewhere, the system would wipe it away with a refresh when time ran out. The same applied to mission tokens. As long as one

chose to cast it aside, the mainframe would judge it as a mission failure... then, she would be able to come back one week later and accept a new mission. Of course, after failing, the one who accepted the mission would have to pay some price; Ling Lan felt that this was still much more worth it than recklessly risking their lives.

However, what happened next proved that Ling Lan's internal abacus was inaccurate. When Ling Lan chose to discard the token, the system actually notified her that the mission was already bound to her and could not be discarded... in other words, the mission she had received was a death command that could not be refused.

Seeing this notification, Ling Lan could not help but show a middle finger to the virtual screen. *D*mmmit, mainframe, you're just too shameless!*

However, since this was already done, Ling Lan did not waste time panicking or despairing. She decided to go back and discuss with her companions how they wanted to complete this mission.

Ling Lan very quickly returned from whence she came and was transported back to the gates of the city lord's manor. Back outside the manor, Ling Lan once again reappeared in her intermediate mecha. Seeing their boss reappear, Qi Long and the others asked Ling Lan excitedly whether she had received a mission.

Ling Lan did not reply, instead asking them to move to a quieter location first. Only then did she share the details of the mission with them. When the others saw the contents of the mission, they instantly fell silent.

Ling Lan smiled wryly. It looked like this mission had scared her companions. She was just about to speak up and explain when Qi Long could be heard to roar excitedly, "Boss, you are just too awesome! Actually obtaining an SSS-rank mission that has not appeared in over several hundred years. I really just need to follow boss and there will be crazy awesome things to do..."

"Yeah! I can't believe that there's something so exciting to do again so soon!" Xie Yi was just as excited.

"I had just been thinking that Boss would likely bring us an extremely high-level mission. Who would have expected Boss to dish out an SSS-rank mission just like that? My guts are still no match for Boss's," sighed Han Jijyun.

Han Jijyun had always set figuring out Ling Lan's thoughts as his highest goal.

However, reality proved that he had still failed this time. Boss was even more savage than he had imagined... but this was their boss! Forever doing things others would not dare to do. Han Jijyun could not know that this mission was not something Ling Lan had asked for on her own initiative, but was rather something that had been forcefully thrown upon Ling Lan.

"In any case, whatever Boss decides to do, I'll do." Luo Lang had no opinion whatsoever on this; he had long decided to follow his boss faithfully.

"If it's a mission of this level, the resources I prepared previously will be lacking considerably. I'll need to go supplement them as soon as possible." At this moment, Lin Zhong-qing was already thinking about how he could compensate for the ranking of the mission. He had no objections at all on accepting this mission.

Ling Lan stared at this group of audacious people and sweatdropped. Fine, she had forgotten that not many of her companions were normal. Earlier when she had thought they had been scared stiff, her mind must have short-circuited for a moment to even consider it.

Ling Lan turned her head to look at the other three silent people, thinking that these three at least must be shocked... after all, those abnormal people like her companions should still be the minority.

And so Ling Lan addressed [No Mecha Unrepaired], saying, "[No Mecha Unrepaired], the mission this time is unexpectedly difficult. You can reconsider your invitation to join this battle clan if you would like." [No Mecha Unrepaired] was after all not that close with them. If by any chance they did not manage to complete the mission, Ling Lan did not want to drag [No Mecha Unrepaired] down with them.

"No, I want to join the battle clan, and I also want to follow you all for the mission..." At Ling Lan's words, [No Mecha Unrepaired] quickly responded emphatically, "I was just moved earlier that I actually have the chance to participate in an SSS-rank mission. This is just too unbelievable." [No Mecha Unrepaired]'s voice actually contained a trace of dreaminess.

"An SSS-rank mission that one might only see once in several hundred years... there is indeed a need to see this. Besides, I believe you all will need my treatment ability even more." [Priceless Kinship] deviated from his usual indifference, becoming unbelievably enthusiastic. It was clear to see how much attraction the SSS-rank

mission held for him as well.

The corners of Ling Lan's lips could not help but twitch. Hells, what kind of members were these whom she had taken in?! Each even more abnormal than the one before, actually so eager to attempt a mission normal people would never dare to touch... She could not help but look towards [Self-Defined Destiny]; her leopard should be a normal person, right?

Li Lanfeng rubbed his jaw and asked with clear interest, "Say, do you all think that by completing this mission, the reward we receive will also be of a legendary level?"

"Legendary level?" Everyone sucked in a sharp breath... within the mecha comms channel, Ling Lan could practically hear the endless dripping sounds of drooling.

Ling Lan stared up into the sky, speechless. She really could not expect much of her team members. As members of a team led by an abnormal person (a freak), they really could never be normal either...

Chapter 310

Planet X192!

In Mecha World, for every ten major cities, there would be a sky metropolis connecting these ten major cities. As its name suggests, the sky metropolises existed in the sky. However, these sky metropolises were not for human inhabitation; they merely functioned as spaceports.

Every day, there would be massive numbers of spacecrafts, military vessels, and cargo ships passing through these metropolises, departing from them or merely stopping by. Many lone wolves, expedition parties, and battle clans which needed to travel to distant lands for their missions would need to enter the sky metropolises to hitch a ride on a starship or some cargo ship. However, though battle clans could freely choose between military vessels and common ships, regular lone wolves and commoner expeditions could only ride civilian spacecrafts.

This was another reason why battle clans were so popular in Mecha World. After all, in Mecha World, 70% of ships were military vessels of the Federation. Furthermore, some military-governed areas could only be accessed by military vessels — general civilian spacecrafts could not even approach. Oftentimes, the spots with the greatest profits were all located in those areas...

For instance, the base camp at the Nebula Boundary where the Swift Dragon Fleet was stationed was an area where only military vessels were permitted to enter. This was also why they would find it troublesome — not yet having the right to board military vessels, they would never be able to get close to their destination by using civilian ships alone.

In any case, today, the initially already extremely bustling sky metropolis was even busier than ever. This was because the once-a-season planetary reclamation activity was about to commence officially, and this was also the one and only time when ordinary lone wolves and commoner expedition teams could board military vessels.

Planetary reclamation was an official activity organised by the Federation government. They would release some newly discovered wild and unexplored planets to the public, allowing civilian individuals or groups to go explore and cultivate the

land. If they discovered any resources beneficial to the Federation or any new biological organisms, the Federation would reward them with countless credits.

Many troubled lone wolves or expedition teams that were not doing well financially had been able to revive due to this activity, becoming famous people or renowned expedition teams in their own right. Therefore, this planetary reclamation activity had become the premier shortcut for ordinary lone wolves or expedition teams to fame and fortune.

"They only see the glory of success but fail to see the consequences of failure. Tell me, these individuals or parties who go on this exploration — how many of them return alive?" As the person in charge of ferrying these adventurers this time, a commanding officer could not help but sigh as he looked at the spirited civilian adventurers down below controlling their mecha to board the starship from the screen of his mainship.

"This is their own choice. Perhaps this failure will let them understand what it means to act within one's means," responded an adjutant coldly from beside the commanding officer. The adjutant did not think highly of these untrained civilian adventurers. If this were not an assignment, he would never have willingly made contact with these trash.

"Oh you. You should not have these kinds of thoughts. Have you never heard the old saying of 'prodigies sprouting from the civilian world'?" said the commander with a laugh, shaking his head.

"That saying has long become obsolete. With the perfected system of the Federation now, any prodigies would have long been excavated for cultivation. Would they have been able to remain hidden until now?" said the adjutant scornfully. These trash which could not even form proper battle clans could only remain mediocre all their lives. "The only thing that perplexes me is why we have to come to this virtual Mecha World to do this mission. It's seriously a complete waste of our time."

At his adjutant's words, the smile on the commander's face vanished. Grimly, he said, "Because the Federation mainframe has sent an emergency notification to us. At the Nebula Boundary of Mecha World, some strange phenomena has occurred. Although it has tried its best to eliminate the problem, it has failed, and it simply cannot discover the reason for its failure."

The adjutant's expression changed. "Could it be that our Federation mainframe has been invaded by an enemy nation's virus?"

The commander nodded solemnly. "Highly possible. This is also why we have secretly entered Mecha World to replace these NPCs under the mainframe's arrangement. You should know that once the Federation mainframe is successfully corrupted by a virus, the entire order of the Federation will utterly collapse. At that time, we will be like deshelled turtles, helpless on the chopping block."

"Are we enough to handle this?" The adjutant was rather concerned. After all, he was not a hacker who was proficient on this front — he really had no certainty in handling everything in the virtual world.

"Don't worry. We are not the only ones who have come. There's still those top-class hackers of the military. Headquarters has even sent out some of those top-level spectres this time..." Aggression flashed across the commander's face. "Thinking to destroy our mainframe, don't they even dare think they will live to tell the tale."

The adjutant could not help but clench his fists. As someone on the verge of breaking through the barrier of ace to advance to imperial operator, this was undoubtedly a great chance for him. He believed that if this was truly an attack by an enemy, they would certainly have top-class operators as escort. Perhaps this was why headquarters had sent a prodigy like him on the verge of a breakthrough here right at this moment.

'Ling Xiao, I will definitely become a legendary figure surpassing you!' Ambition flared in the adjutant's eyes for a brief instant. That god-class operator General Ling Xiao who had broken records multiple times had completely trodden other prodigies under his feet. No matter how outstanding they were, in comparison to his records, they were all not even worth a mention. But all of that was in the past now — if he could advance successfully this year, he would break Ling Xiao's record of being the youngest ever to become an imperial operator...

At this thought, the adjutant could not help but shiver in excitement. He would definitely pull Ling Xiao down from his godly pedestal!

Among the crowd of mecha registering to board a starship was Ling Lan's party. Around them were all advanced mecha which had been modified, and there were even quite a few formidable special-class mecha. In contrast, their team appeared extremely slapdash. Qi Long and the other four of Ling Lan's original team, Li Lanfeng, and Li Shiyu were all using standard Federation mecha, while [No Mecha Unrepaired] and Ling Lan were using intermediate mecha which were one level below the others.

Even though [No Mecha Unrepaired]'s mecha had obviously been modified quite a bit, no matter how well it was modified, it was still nothing before an advanced mecha.

The level difference between mecha was not something which could be bridged with modification... Of course, this was only referring to ordinary modifications. This may not necessarily be true of a mecha which had been modified by a master-level mechanic.

That said, no one would believe that an ordinary expedition team whose advanced mecha were still just standard mecha would have intermediate mecha modified by a master-level mechanic...

"Combat, it's our turn." Ling Lan saw that it was finally their turn and quickly urged Qi Long on their party comms to go up and register. As her present mecha was still an intermediate mecha, she was really rather unsuited to be the party leader.

"Got it, Boss!" Receiving his boss's reminder, Qi Long, who had been in a constant state of excitement, finally scrambled over to register. All this had been arranged beforehand — from the moment they set off on the mission, the public leader had been Qi Long.

As Qi Long was registering, Han Jijyun finally voiced his doubts, "Boss, why won't you let us help you redeem an advanced mecha?"

A lower mecha operator could of course pilot a more advanced mecha, but they would not be able to draw out the full power of the mecha and may even be unable to use it for long periods of time. This was because the more advanced a mecha was, the higher the demands it would place on the operator's physical constitution and stamina. Some people have tried using advanced mecha as intermediate mecha warriors — 10 minutes later, they would be utterly drained and no longer able to continue piloting the mecha. This stark truth dispelled all thoughts of any operator thinking to take a shortcut; they all practised honestly to advance.

However, Han Jijyun and the others believed that with their boss's capabilities, even if he piloted a mecha at a higher level, he would be able to play around with the advanced mecha like it were his own arms. Thinking back on how terrifying Ling Lan's control skills were that year back then, after so many years, his skills could only have gotten better.

"Because, this is more convenient for my mobility. No one will pay attention to an intermediate mecha. Besides, as far as I know, boarding details must match actual ranking, otherwise the mainframe will refuse boarding," explained Ling Lan calmly. She was too embarrassed to admit that she already had a secret weapon, although this secret weapon was not something she really wanted...

Han Jijyun was just about to say something when he heard Qi Long yelling in the comms channel, "GO, GO, GO~" It turned out he had finished registering and was now urging them to get on the military vessel.

Seeing this, Ling Lan said, "Let's board the ship." That said, she was the first to follow Qi Long to walk towards the boarding entrance of the military vessel. As these were all transport ships, after entering through the entrance, they saw an extremely large empty space. Right then, there were already quite a few mecha inside. They followed the order they entered to walk over to their exclusive secured seats.

In order to ensure the stability of the mecha during transport, the hold of transport ships were all equipped with this type of mecha-specific secured seats. Once a mecha was buckled in, the mecha would not be able to move. Other than the transport ship activating the release of the secured seats, the mecha could only try to break free by breaking the seat with brute strength.

Ling Lan's team walked over to their secured seats in an orderly manner, and then they all settled in to rest respectively. This so-called rest just meant they were sleeping in their respective cockpits. Once the ship left the spaceport, no one would be allowed to log off until they arrived at the next save point.

Fortunately, this journey was not a very long one; it only took one night. Besides, Ling Lan and the others had already made the proper preparations. All of them had requested several days' leave from their instructors, and their virtual login pods were also properly filled with energy replenishing fluid, which should be enough to sustain them till they arrived at the new save point.

This time, the destination the Federation had organised for the planetary reclamation activity was planet X192, which was not too far away from the Nebula Boundary. Ling Lan was aiming to use the planet X192 as their springboard, so they would have the chance to enter the stationed camp grounds of the Swift Dragon Fleet at the Nebula Boundary.

Right then, they did not know that a bunch of people from the Federation military were also planning on doing the exact same thing.

The night passed in silence. The transport fleet very quickly arrived at the Nebula Boundary and began its descent towards planet X192.

At the same time, relevant information on planet X192 was announced on the public channel of Mecha World:

Planet X192; Gravity 29.7, Strength of Magnetic Field $15e-18$ tesla. Temperature: $56^{\circ}C$. Normal Wind Strength level 12; Extreme Wind Strength level 19. Atmospheric Elements: Carbon Dioxide 87%, Hydrogen 3%, Chlorine 8%, Others 2%...

"F*ck, is there really life on this planet?" Listening to these details that were not at all suitable for human life, Qi Long asked his companions as he adjusted the settings of his mecha to accommodate for planet X192.

Chapter 311

Abandon?

"So what if it's unsuitable for life? Reclamation is not for the sake of seeking lifeforms, but to find minerals and resources," said Han Jijyun coldly in response to Qi Long's question. He felt that this question of Qi Long's was really just too silly.

"Alert. The starship shall enter the atmospheric layer in 10 seconds. Please ensure all anti-shock measures are in place, please ensure all anti-shock measures are in place..." In the public comms of the mecha, the voice of the starship's JMC rang out.

At the end of the 10 second countdown, all of the mecha operators in the transport hold could feel an intense quaking which lasted for over 10 seconds before the starship gradually stabilised again. At this time, all the mecha operators knew that they should have already passed through the atmospheric layer of X192 and were now truly within the airspace of the planet.

Sure enough, the JMC's voice once again rang out in the public comms. This time, it was to notify them that in 1 minute and 30 seconds, the starship would officially land on the ground of planet X192.

One minute and thirty seconds was not a very short period of time; it was enough for the mecha operators to make all necessary preparations for landing. Even so, when the countdown hit zero and the starship landed heavily on the planet's surface, the intense vibrations still caused many mecha operators to feel their Qi and blood roil in their chests. Quite a few of the mecha operators did not manage to regain their equilibrium till several beats later.

Ling Lan's original party of six did not react in any way. Under Ling Lan's tutelage, even the one with the weakest physical constitution, Han Jijyun, was able to easily withstand the impact. Well aware of her companions' conditions, Ling Lan skipped over them to ask [No Mecha Unrepaired], [Priceless Kinship], and [Self-Defined Destiny] how they were holding up.

[Priceless Kinship] did not delay, instantly responding to say that he had no problem at all. Stopping to think about it, Ling Lan understood instantly. Li Shiyu's body could

not be that weak... he was the dux of the Military Medical Research specialization! Exceedingly intelligent, he would never allow his own body to be all that weak.

[No Mecha Unrepaired] was the second to reply. Just as Ling Lan predicted, he felt somewhat uncomfortable. However, after swallowing a tube of concentrated recovery fluid, he felt much better.

The final one to answer was [Self-Defined Destiny]. Even though he said that everything was fine, what kind of ears did Ling Lan have? She could clearly hear that the other's breath was rather short — the violent vibrations earlier must have given [Self-Defined Destiny] some trouble despite him saying otherwise.

This made Ling Lan frown slightly. She had only been mentally prepared regarding the slightly weaker constitution of [No Mecha Unrepaired]. After all, [No Mecha Unrepaired] was a support type researcher — it was natural for him to have some foundational difference from specialized mecha operators like them. Thus, for [No Mecha Unrepaired] to falter in situations like this was normal. However, things were different with [Self-Defined Destiny]. [Self-Defined Destiny] was a specialized mecha operator too — this was something the other had told her personally and she believed that the leopard would not lie to her. Besides, his control skills were more than sufficient to make him a specialized mecha operator.

She would never, ever have considered that the leopard, who should have an amazing constitution based on her impression of him, would actually have a constitution roughly similar to that of [No Mecha Unrepaired]. This meant that the other's strength and stamina would not support drawn-out battle...

This forced Ling Lan to ponder calmly — could her old friend the leopard really become a permanent member of her clan? Although Ling Lan had gotten along very well with the leopard, and she also greatly cherished the rapport between them, this did not mean that she would allow the other to drag down her entire clan. She needed to think about the futures of these companions who had grown up alongside her.

It had to be said that in Ling Lan's heart, the leopard was still not as important as her companions. For her companions, she could abandon her leopard.

Sensing his boss's thoughts, Little Four hurriedly explained, *"Boss, because the spectre's spiritual power is too strong, that is why the damage to his body is great. It's just like Boss in your previous world. Of course, with the gene agents, this world now has*

considerably improved on this front, but it still cannot fully cure the problem of the weakened constitution."

Little Four was rather fond of this spectre with abilities similar to his. At the very least, the other gave him a sense of kinship, which was why he decided to speak up for [Self-Defined Destiny]. *"Honestly, spectres should not be able to operate mecha. The fact that [Self-Defined Destiny] can do this is already extremely outstanding. Furthermore, having a spectre around is also very advantageous to the clan. Spectres are very sensitive to the presence of other spectres; he will be able to protect the others in the clan during critical moments."*

"Won't you be able to protect everyone?" Although Little Four's words moved Ling Lan a little, the problem of the leopard's constitution still made her feel extremely conflicted.

"Of course I can, but Boss, there will always be times when you're alone, or when the team splits up to act. At those times, having an additional spectre will increase the safety rates for everyone on the team no matter how things are arranged," replied Little Four calmly. He did not believe that his boss would trivialize her clan members' safety.

As expected, Ling Lan paused after hearing what Little Four had to say.

"Besides, it's not like the other's weak constitution is unchangeable." Little Four prepared his finishing move.

"Oh?" Ling Lan was extremely interested. If the problem of the leopard's constitution could be resolved, she naturally did not want to abandon the leopard. After all, it was so rare to find a friend with such good rapport. Ling Lan treated Qi Long and her other childhood companions as followers and sons to be raised, while the leopard was the very first one to give her the feeling of having a friend. As such, Ling Lan treasured him greatly.

"Boss, have you forgotten how your body recovered? As long as there are gene agents, once I've modified them, the other will be able to absorb them endlessly. Combine that with your Qi exercises and the foundational physical skills of the learning space, and by applying all three methods simultaneously, this problem should be fixed in two to three years." Little Four reminded Ling Lan. How she had resolved her own latent issues would be how the other could resolve his own latent issues.

"I'll have to think about this." Ling Lan glanced at [Self-Defined Destiny] and cut short the topic. This was because all the mecha had already begun to leave their secured seats and were now lining up to walk out of the hold's door. There was one other reason why Ling Lan did not want to make a decision just yet. She wanted to first see if the leopard could actually gain her companions' acknowledgement. If her companions truly accepted him, she would willingly help her leopard solve this problem.

Everything would still depend on how the leopard performed in future! Ling Lan sighed internally and then led her party members to walk out of the hold doors.

Right then, Li Lanfeng had no idea that he had almost been given three strikes ¹ by his rabbit. As soon as he could, he downed some restorative agent, and very soon, his body had recovered. He quickly followed the other members of his party forward, rather frustrated with himself deep inside. He had not expected all the members of the rabbit's party to have such sturdy constitutions. Of all the members, his constitution actually ranked at the very bottom... he silently clenched his fists tight, deciding that he would increase his nightly basic training by threefold. He definitely would not disgrace his rabbit.

The moment they stepped out of the starship transport's hold, a wave of heat swept over them. Even though the temperature within their mecha cockpits had already been adjusted lower, they could still feel the difference from the temperatures of an inhabitable ² planet. On the respective screens of all the mecha in Ling Lan's party, an endless desert came into view. It was a swirling sheet of white with not a single speck of any other colour. After only looking at the scene for several seconds, they could already feel their eyes vaguely starting to prickle in pain.

"Adjust the temperature of your cockpit. Lower it by 10 degrees. And set your visuals to infrared mode." Just when everyone was stunned, Ling Lan's voice rang out in their party comms.

Used to obeying Ling Lan's commands, Qi Long and the others quickly made the adjustments as instructed. Once they had adjusted the initial internal temperature of 25 degrees down to 15, they felt all the heat which had penetrated the cockpit completely wiped away. Their cockpits once again returned to regular levels of comfort. Meanwhile, changing their screen displays to infrared mode eased the strain on their eyes. They no longer felt as if they were staring into a blizzard of white, and their eyes stopped hurting.

Li Lanfeng had the utmost faith in his rabbit, so he did not think much of the other's immensely accurate judgment. However, Li Shiyu and [No Mecha Unrepaired] could not help but feel a jolt go through their hearts. Their leader must know everything about mecha like the back of his hands; otherwise, he would not have been able to make such accurate and precise judgments in a split second. [No Mecha Unrepaired] found his respect for Ling Lan deepening, while Li Shiyu too gradually began to acknowledge this Boss Lan who he had never thought well of, who liked to turn common sense on its head.

When they truly walked out onto the planet, they were shocked by the scene before their eyes. Those mecha that had walked out before them were currently struggling against the sands of the area. Many mecha had sunk into the sandy ground, while even more had no choice but to power up their engines to fly into the air and move forwards that way.

"Warning. Do not use your engines for a long time. The temperature and atmospheric elements here will cause great damage to your engines." In the public comms channel, the JMC's anxious voice rang out once more in warning.

He had barely finished speaking when in the skies not too far away, a loud boom rang out as a mecha's engine abruptly exploded. The strength of the explosion instantly sent the mecha careening to the ground. The entire mecha crashed into the sand and its massive body became completely buried within it. If not for the help of his party members, he would not have been able to resolve this dire situation on his own — all that would have awaited him was death.

"Godd*mn, what a dangerous planet." Witnessing this scene, Xie Yi could not help but exclaim in the party comms. However, he was only exclaiming for the sake of exclaiming; he would not shrink back in fear because of this.

"Let us go." Ling Lan's voice had yet to fade when she had already controlled her mecha to begin striding onto this patch of desert. But then, [Self-Defined Destiny] suddenly shouted, "Wait a moment!"

"Hm?" Ling Lan controlled her mecha to dip her head at him, signalling for [Self-Defined Destiny] to explain why he had stopped her.

"I think that it's better to first send someone to test things out," said Li Lanfeng with a smile, "I volunteer myself. As a new member, I hope everyone can give me a chance to

perform." Li Lanfeng's words made the initially rather tense atmosphere of the team dissipate instantly. Qi Long even began to laugh uproariously, while there were several other soft giggles and chuckles that were almost inaudible — god knows who was laughing so secretly.

The corners of Ling Lan's lips quirked up; she was extremely in favour of the leopard's behaviour, so she said, "Alright, go." Ling Lan hoped the leopard would be accepted by her companions; thus, she naturally indicated her support of the leopard's request without any hesitation.

Chapter 312

Robbery

Hearing [Lingtian First-String] agree, Li Lanfeng was exhilarated. He breathed in deeply, trying to calm himself. This time, he must definitely perform well and not disgrace his rabbit. Li Lanfeng knew well that in order for him to find secure footing within the rabbit's team, relying purely on the friendship between himself and the rabbit would not be enough.

Li Lanfeng operated his mecha to dash out onto the sands, landing in the endless desert which had already swallowed many mecha. Very quickly, the shifting sand beneath his feet had sucked in both of his mecha's legs. His mecha began sinking down at a rapid pace — at this speed, his entire mecha might be completely buried a minute later.

"The default desert-mode setting of the mecha does not match up to the real conditions. The buoyancy difference is extremely large. The settings need to be altered. Change it to twenty. No. Thirty. Still not enough. Forty, that's a little too much... correction. It should be 37 or 38. Confirmed as 38. Original mecha traction setting lacking. Compensation coefficient at 10 results in sluggishness. Change coefficient to 9, success. There is an error with the original granular load ¹. Increase load value to 20. Still wrong, increase to 25? Adjusted to 24, confirmed..." In the party comms, [Self-Defined Destiny]'s rapid-fire speech came through clearly, along with the faint sound of fingers moving at super high control speeds.

This gave all the other members of Ling Lan's party a shock; they knew what this represented. Setting aside the brash and forthright Qi Long whose control was coarse and based solely on his instinct, even Han Jijyun with his formidable calculation skills could not collect on-scene data and perform such accurate corrections in such a short amount of time. Those rapid tapping sounds and swishing noises also meant that the other's finger-speed had currently achieved a frightening level.

This caused Qi Long and the others to begin taking [Self-Defined Destiny], this person who had just joined them, seriously. Although they would never doubt Boss Lan's judgment, without experiencing it first-hand, they would never have known that this

seemingly friendly and humble [Self-Defined Destiny] was also a control prodigy. As expected, those who Boss Lan took a shine to would never be simple.

Still, after that first jolt of surprise, Qi Long and the others quickly calmed down. Without waiting for Ling Lan to give the order, they immediately began adjusting the settings of their mecha according to [Self-Defined Destiny]'s calculated adjustments. After applying all those settings, Li Lanfeng's mecha had already pulled both his feet out from the shifting sands to stand up properly. He was now standing on the sands like it was solid ground and was waiting for them to come to him. This proved that those settings of his were absolutely correct.

This scene also caused those mecha still struggling with the sand to stare, gobsmacked, but they soon figured things out and began manually adjusting their mecha settings as well. Still, the process was not as easy as they had assumed. Manual adjustment of settings required one to know all the settings of a mecha like the palm of one's hand; if one only had a half-baked understanding of the settings, they would never be able to accomplish it to the degree that Li Lanfeng had.

"Alright, let's move." Seeing this, Ling Lan no longer hesitated, instantly giving out the order.

Following this cry, the eight mecha remaining on the platform shot out like cannonballs to land gracefully in the desert. After reuniting with [Self-Defined Destiny], they ventured off swiftly into the depths of the desert.

This scene was captured by the surveillance system of the starship and was swiftly transmitted to the starship's control room. The adjutant in the control room saw the performance of this team and a slight smile appeared on his face as he said, "Looks like it's not all trash. This team is still somewhat presentable, especially this mecha..." The one he was pointing at was precisely the first one to go out into the desert to feel out the conditions, [Self-Defined Destiny].

"That's why I said that civilian mecha operators may not be completely worthless," responded the commander with a serious expression, "Still, I keep feeling that the reclamation efforts this time won't go smoothly..."

The adjutant was taken aback. "Are you saying..."

"I just received a notification from the mainframe saying that not too far from us,

there's something strange with planet X193. It's investigating what's going on right now. Once it has concrete news, it'll contact us again." The commander's brow was deeply furrowed. He had been studying all this time to try and figure out a way for them to get close to the base camp of the Swift Dragons, but all his mental efforts had been useless. He could only wait passively for the notification from the mainframe — this made the commander who liked to have everything within his control uneasy; he did not like this feeling of having his actions dictated by someone else.

"It looks like the mainframe is very afraid that there will be further issues this time..." The adjutant's eyes narrowed as if thinking of something.

"So we can only wait passively for the mainframe's notification now..." said the commander with a sigh. He was feeling increasingly uncertain about his mission.



Seven days went by swiftly. Within these seven days, nothing much happened to Ling Lan's party. As Ling Lan was not here to cultivate the planet in search of wealth, she did not split her party into smaller exploration teams and spread them out as the other expedition teams did. The nine people of her party broke into three smaller teams and stayed in a triangular formation. All of them moved together within the same district, often checking in with one another. Even if there were some expedition teams who harboured ill intent, when they saw how many members Ling Lan's party had and how the party was in a triangular formation equally capable of offence or defence, they did not dare to act impulsively.

The triangular formation was actually a basic Federation mecha formation — it was typically formed by three mecha teams at three points of a triangle moving as one. This type of formation allowed any one of the component mecha teams to become the arrowhead of the entire team; it was one of the most commonly used formations by the Federation mecha forces.

Even so, the luck of Ling Lan's party was still pretty decent. Although they did not search a large area, they still managed to find some rare metals, as well as some unidentified minerals. They secretly noted all these. They would only need to pass this info on to the registration staff on the starship, and even if it did not yield a large sum in return, the reward would certainly be enough to supply enough power for their mecha for several months.

Speaking of which, we should now talk about the usage of power in Mecha World and the various ways to obtain power. An active mecha, even if its user did not log in to operate it, would still have a basic amount of power drain. Thus, every mecha operator would have the daily pressure of collecting power. Power could be obtained by completing missions or foraging in the wilderness, and it could also be purchased with credits in the power stores of Mecha World.

Therefore, if they had not saved up enough power sources, mecha operators who had not logged in for long periods of time may very likely find that their mecha could no longer be activated for use the next time they logged in. Replenishing power which had been lost was even more expensive than stocking up to begin with. Thus, in Mecha World, the average mecha operator would normally only have one active mecha. Those operators who were slightly stronger would at most have one spare reserve mecha, because just one more mecha was beyond the means of the average mecha operator to support. The only exceptions were those people with great ability or those who had an abundance of credits.

This was also why many mecha operators would do away with those mecha they had replaced, trading them for some power supplies to keep. This was also why when Li Lanfeng had only redeemed another mecha when he was about to advance to intermediate mecha; a normal mecha operator just could not keep all the mecha they had ever redeemed on them.

The reason the conditions were so strict was out of fear that the mecha operators would not be able to focus fully on training with the mecha they had in their hands. Mind you, the further things progressed, the finer the distinction of mecha categorisation became. For example, for intermediate mecha, just humanoid mecha alone had 5 types, and by the time it came to advanced mecha, there were 8 types of humanoid mecha. If operators could not concentrate on training with one mecha, even the most prodigious mecha operator would end up mediocre because of this. Thus, Mecha World had no choice but to use material pressure to forcefully eliminate the distraction for the mecha operators, making them calm down and train hard in the control skills for one mecha...

Consequently, in Mecha World, every mecha operator would have headaches over power supplies — Ling Lan and her party were no exception. They could come out and do missions for so long all thanks to Lin Zhong-qing, who had done his duty as support logistician to conserve power all this time. However, this would only support them for another half a month at most, so any gains here would be a great boon overall.

Just as they were planning to move on to the next district, they received an emergency alert from the military vessel's control centre. The alert stated that all the mecha operators were expected to rush back to the transport ship within 3 days because the transport ship would be leaving X192 at 12 noon sharp three days later. As for the reason why, the military vessel's side simply said that there would be a violent elemental energy turbulence on planet X192 three days later. This turbulence may very well destroy any and all mecha still remaining on the planet at that time.

After discussing it over, Ling Lan's party decided to continue foraging for one more day before rushing back. Although they were only a day's journey away from the transport ship, Ling Lan did not like to cut things so close — she liked leaving some room for error in all things.

A day's time passed quickly. After some minor organising of the resources they had gathered and recharging the power of their mecha, they operated their mecha to move towards the transport ship at full speed. But halfway through their journey, an accident occurred before their eyes.

There was a loud 'BOOM' — straight ahead on the path Ling Lan's party was travelling on, the sound of a violent explosion rang out. This sound was clearly the result of a mecha using a cannon-type firearm.

"Razor, lead your team over to take a look." Ling Lan frowned lightly. Using a cannon-type firearm on this planet was undoubtedly a very dangerous act. The atmosphere already contained hydrogen and chlorine; adding high heat would very easily result in self-destruction. If triggered by a cannon-type firearm, there was a high chance of a chain reaction occurring, which could easily endanger the safety of her party if they were unlucky. In order to obtain a clear picture of the situation, Ling Lan instructed Luo Lang's team, which was currently the arrowhead of their formation, to go check things out.

Luo Lang's small team consisted of Luo Lang, Xie Yi, and Li Shiyu, with Luo Lang as the interim head. Receiving his orders, Luo Lang led Xie Yi and Li Shiyu in a quick sprint forwards.

Not long after, Ling Lan and the others received a shared video channel from Luo Lang's team. It turned out that about 1 kilometre ahead of them, there was a mecha team of 15 people who were currently launching a series of violent attacks at a small mecha team of only 5 people.

If they guessed correctly, this should be a robbery in progress. This was a common scene during planetary reclamation events — some large expedition teams with bad reputations just loved to do such things, because robbing others at this time was much more profitable than foraging for themselves.

It looked like that team of five was also the gutsy type, otherwise a fight would not have broken out. Many smaller mecha teams would choose to give up a large portion of their resources when faced with such unbeatable odds, choosing the option of safe return. But this team had not chosen to give in — despite seeing that they would never be able to survive, they had actually taken the initiative to launch a blast cannon ². They were obviously trying to kill their opponents in a kamikaze attack, but their luck did not seem to be very good. The firearm had not ignited the elements within the air, so they were now being oppressed and beaten — it would not be long before they were completely annihilated.

Chapter 313

Precious Power Source!

"Boss, what should we do? Should we wait or circle around them?" Luo Lang observed the happenings from a distance, making contact with the team at the same time.

Ling Lan did not make a decision immediately, instead asking Qi Long, "Combat, what do you think?"

The battle maniac Qi Long had long been driven stir-crazy by these past calm and uneventful days. The moment he heard Boss's question, he quickly replied, "Let's go straight through. If any among them are blind enough to dare rob us, let's just end them." These words were said with a great thuggish air, but it was also Qi Long's true opinion.

"I think it is very necessary for us to hone our blades ¹ beforehand." As his sworn brother, Han Jijyun naturally had to show his utmost support for Qi Long's stand. Besides, he too felt that going through a battle would allow their team to become closer. After all, they had just added three additional people, so they had to adapt to the new additions' skills and work on their teamwork. Han Jijyun liked to have everything in hand.

[No Mecha Unrepaired] had no opinion on this matter, while Li Lanfeng's thoughts ran parallel to Han Jijyun's without any prior discussion. So, Li Lanfeng piped up in support, "Abacus speaks truly. We're working together as a team for the first time after all. There is indeed a need for a chance for a real battle. If there are any problems, we can then take some time to adjust before we get too deep into the mission. This will also be extremely beneficial to the future of our clan."

Lin Zhong-qing did not say outright whether he agreed or disagreed — he only told his boss that he had enough power blocks saved up to support this battle. Indirectly, he was also conveying that he too approved of this fight.

Since everyone had the desire to fight, Ling Lan of course would not refuse. Thus, she ordered Luo Lang's team of three which was a distance away observing to stay put, saying, "Razor, wait till we get there, then we will move together."

Ling Lan was afraid Luo Lang would act impulsively — even though the other side's combat power was just at the level of a typical civilian expedition team, their numbers were not few. For Luo Lang's team of only three people to go up against them was still rather dangerous.

"Understood, Boss," responded Luo Lang firmly. He took Ling Lan's orders even more seriously than Qi Long did — Qi Long might still nod on the surface but disobey secretly, while Luo Lang would never disobey something he had promised his boss.

Very soon, Ling Lan had led the rest of the team to Luo Lang's side. Then, she indicated for everyone to move forwards in their original formation, acting as if they knew nothing as they approached the heart of the combat. But secretly, everyone was already mentally prepared for battle. The moment they found the others' arrows pointed at them, they would swoop down upon them at lightning speed and destroy the other side.

"Leader, there's a mecha squad incoming." A sentry member noticed Luo Lang's 3-man team, and he quickly reported the sighting to his team leader at the heart of the fight.

"How many people?" The team leader, who was currently using firepower to suppress their opponents, could not help but frown and ask.

The opposing 5-man team, which was currently being pummelled by them and could only resist futilely, had long been their target. They had discovered them when the other side had managed to collect a rare and precious power source. The team leader knew very well what power sources represented. As long as they could possess this power source and hand it over to the military, they would become filthy rich overnight. Therefore, they had long lain in ambush here, planning to kill the other party to snatch this rare and precious power source.

Initially, they had thought that by surrounding the other side with 15 people, the other 5 would definitely meekly hand over the power source. Unexpectedly, these five people were all a bunch of tough customers, actually choosing mutual destruction and taking the initiative to use firearms. If not for their bad luck in failing to ignite the hydrogen and chlorine in the air, his team might probably have been completely wiped out.

But other than the first person among them who had to retreat away from the fight after receiving heavy damage at the start, the other team members had reacted

speedily. Now, under their frenzied attacks, they had very quickly finished off three of the five people, and the remaining two people would probably just take them another 2 to 3 minutes to handle...

Who could have expected that, just as they were about to reap the fruits of victory, some unforeseen guests would arrive. This spoiled the mood of this team leader considerably — he even felt rather vindictive, thinking to just annihilate this troublesome mecha squad directly.

"It's a 3-man formation." For some reason, the sentry seemed to have not seen the other six mecha on both flanks behind Luo Lang, so he only reported Luo Lang's team of three.

"Hmph, three people? They're bloody seeking death! How long before they run into us?" With a cold sniff, the team leader decided in his mind to stop these three impudent mecha. Perhaps they would be able to obtain some extra resources from the three.

"I reckon there's still about a minute." The sentry gave a rough estimate based on his gauge of the speed of Luo Lang's team.

"Okay. Don't stop them. Just let them through just like that..." instructed the team leader through gritted teeth. He then turned to the attacking team members and ordered, "Everyone, beat them hard. Try your best to finish them off in one minute, our new prey is coming."

"Yeah!" "Roger that!" "Awesome!" "Watch me..." Raucous hollers rang out from the team comms; it was clear to see that this was not a bunch of orderly civilised people.

Subsequently, they no longer worried about limiting their power use. The cold beam guns in their hands rattled as cold beams poured out in a torrent, raining down in a sheet towards the heads of the surviving two opponents. Out of fear of igniting the elemental energy in the air, they had all chosen weapons using cold beams. This crazy wave of attack gave the remaining two mecha no chance to fight back; they could only turn their beam shields up to the max to try and hold off these attacks.

The two of them knew what the final outcome awaiting them was — once their mecha ran out of power, the beam shields would stop working. They would definitely be shredded by those cold beams and die here. The penalty for death in Mecha World was

extremely brutal. Restarting not only wiped out the mecha you possessed, but the deduction of points was also astronomical. Lacking points after restarting, many mecha operators were even reduced to becoming a lower mecha operator again...

"Big Brother, let me hold them off. Go find those newcomers quick and ask for help." These two had found out about the impending arrival of an unexpected team of mecha from the alerts of their mecha, so one of the mecha immediately shouted out a suggestion to the other mecha.

"They're surrounding us on all sides. They have no intention at all of letting us run away. Second Brother, even if we die, we must die together, along with the rest of our brothers." said Big Brother with a tortured smile. Then, his face twisted into a scowl as he said, "However, I will not let them win." He rubbed a hand over the rare power source they had found inside his bag, a wild idea rising up in his mind.

Big Brother abruptly spat out a mouthful of spit and said fiercely, "Second Brother, take a gamble with me. We must hold out until those people arrive..." Big Brother's eyes were shadowed, a sort of savage wildness within them.

Right then, the silhouettes of Luo Lang's team could already be seen. By the time both sides could see each other, the two trapped people were on the brink of running out of power.

"Just a little short. Just 10 more seconds would do!" Big Brother yelled shrilly. He was not content to just die here like this.

At that moment, Second Brother who had been shielding against the cold beams by his side suddenly opened his mecha's limbs and hugged Big Brother's mecha beside him tightly, covering the other's entire mecha beneath his own. All the cold beams focused on Second Brother's mecha, and 2 seconds later, his flickering beam shield shattered, letting all the beams through to rain on the body of his mecha.

"Big Brother, you must avenge us!" Amidst a tragic howl, Second Brother held on for another 10 seconds or so by relying purely on the inherent defence of his mecha's body. Finally, his mecha too broke down into countless fragments under the bombardment of cold beams.

Big Brother's mecha was finally revealed. At the same time, the beam shield he had deactivated reappeared once more — he was preparing for his final stand.

"Godd*mmmit, actually letting him drag things out by 11 seconds." The team leader could not help but swear. Meanwhile, Luo Lang's team of 3 mecha was about to enter his team's shooting range in the very next second.

"Old Lu, take two teams to deal with those three mecha. It's fine to just leave me four mecha." The team leader knew he could not delay any longer. If the newcomers initiated attack, even if they managed to take down the other's three mecha, they would still suffer losses. And he did not just plan to rob these two batches of mecha; he wanted to gain even more.

Old Lu had just pulled away two smaller teams of mecha from the main team when the staunchly defending Big Brother suddenly revved his engines. The loud roar of the engines caused everyone's face to change. And then, Big Brother operated his mecha to leap out, pushing the speed of his mecha to the max, flying swiftly towards Luo Lang's team.

This unexpected scene stunned the team who was trying to rob him. By the time they came to their senses, the other had actually charged out of their barrier circle.

"Godd*mmmit, take him down!" The team leader bellowed furiously. This behaviour of the other had undoubtedly enraged him; right now, all he wanted was to finish off this detestable mecha before his eyes.

The escaping mecha did not activate his beam shield and waste that last bit of resources he had. He only pushed the engines of his mecha to the max, flying forwards desperately. This type of action was undoubtedly a form of suicide because the heat from the engines could very well ignite the energies in the air. If that happened, the final outcome would be the self-destruction of his own mecha, and he would die at the scene. However, in Big Brother's heart, this kind of death was still much better than dying at the opponent's hands.

Perhaps the Heavens took pity on him — his engine did not explode all the way through. Still, the cold beam guns chasing behind him had struck his mecha, causing his mecha to be riddled with holes from the shoulder down to his entire right arm. Luckily, these attacks had not struck his cockpit, otherwise he would have already been dead.

Still, even so, Big Brother's mecha had still successfully gotten close to Luo Lang's team.

"Take this. This is the precious power source we found. Please help us take our revenge," shouted Big Brother loudly through his mecha's public comms. Using only the left hand of his mecha, he drew out something from his bag and tossed it at Luo Lang with all his might.

The item flew like a cannonball towards Luo Lang, who reflexively caught it. Before he could even look at it, cold beams once again struck Big Brother's mecha from behind. This time, he could not escape — his cockpit was directly hit.

The entire mecha blew apart with a loud boom, becoming a pile of scrap metal to fall before Luo Lang, causing Luo Lang's brow to scrunch up tightly.

Chapter 314

Rapport

"Leader, no precious power source dropped. Looks like that thing has been transferred to them." One of the mecha had not waited for his leader's instruction to fly over to the remains of that opponent's mecha to do a swift check, and he then reported his findings in disappointment.

In Mecha World, as long as a mecha and its operator were directly destroyed, all of the precious items, materials, weapons, equipment and so on belonging to Mecha World would definitely drop. Thus, just a quick check would be enough to tell whether or not the item they wanted had still been on the operator when he died.

At this news, the team leader became livid. He instantly pointed a beam gun at Luo Lang's team of three and sneered, "Punk, hand over that thing quickly. Or else we won't be polite anymore."

Without even glancing at the item in his hands, Luo Lang threw it into his mecha's bag and sneered back in return, "Since it has come into our hands, it won't be leaving them. I would really like to see how you all plan to be rude to us." Since he knew Boss planned to teach the other a lesson anyway, Luo Lang naturally would not show the opponent any face.

"You're really asking for it." The rage in the team leader's chest burned hotter — once, twice, these three or four puny kittens actually dared to bare their teeth against his threats. Even as he felt immensely frustrated, he also felt that this was a great loss of face. He decided that he would definitely torment these three arrogant punks before him to death and let them realise that they were not qualified enough to be arrogant just yet!

Before he could say 'kill them', the mecha responsible for sentry duty suddenly yelled out once again, "Leader, two more squads of mecha have appeared. There are six more in total..."

"F*ck!" The team leader could not help but curse internally. Still somewhat rational, he knew his team could not finish off nine mecha in one go without suffering any

losses, so he instructed, "Warn those squads that we are fighting here. Tell them to circle around."

This was a type of established convention within Mecha World. When two parties were in conflict and did not want any other parties to disturb them, they would arrange for sentry members to go alert uninvolved mecha teams passing by so they would go around them and avoid the area where they were fighting.

After giving his instructions to the sentry member, the team leader then ordered all the other team members present, "Attack at full force!"

The reason why the team leader would call his team members to attack without worry was that, in his mind, he had already assumed that these six mecha that had just appeared would definitely circle around them. Generally, an uninvolved party would never willingly stick their nose into trouble. However, he could never have expected that these six newcomer mecha were not uninvolved members at all...

He had barely given the command when, in that instant where his men had yet to pull the triggers in their hands, a long prepared Luo Lang moved one step before they could. He slammed two heavy fists into the ground and followed it up with a strong and powerful sweeping kick. The sand and rocks on the ground were instantly jolted into the air and then sent smashing down like a waterfall on the heads of those 13 mecha. For a moment, the two sides completely lost sight of each other.

Seeing the wall of sand and dirt flying at them, the opponents' first reflex was to dodge and wait for their vision to clear before attacking. However, they could never have imagined that Luo Lang's team of three who were clearly the underdogs, being outnumbered, would not choose to escape at this time, instead following up with another attack.

The sand and gravel had yet to fully settle when the team leader heard three chilling cries ring out in his party's comms, which were then swiftly followed by the sounds of mecha crashing heavily into the ground.

These terrifying cries caused a tendril of fear to rise up within the team members' hearts. Instead of pushing the attack, they chose instinctively to defend. Their first thought was to first protect themselves well.

Finally, the cascading waterfall of sand and dirt settled completely and everyone could

see clearly again. Only at this time did they discover that three of their teammates were already on the ground. Eye-catching crimson fluid was trickling out from the cockpits of those fallen mecha, staining the white sand beneath the mecha red...

Beside them stood those three newcomer mecha. In each of their hands was a standard high-alloy long sword that came equipped with every mecha. Blood still remained on their blades, slowly sliding along the edge of their swords to drip to the ground. Everyone knew what this meant — those three teammates of theirs were definitely dead.

Still off-balanced and frightened, they abruptly heard the other side's leader ¹ sneer and say, "With just this much strength, actually daring to threaten to be impolite to us?" Luo Lang had initially thought that these people must be rather capable for them to dare waylay others to rob them in broad daylight — who knew they were actually so worthless? One attack had been enough to throw them into a state of disarray.

At these words, the team leader almost bit through his tongue. Right then, he knew that these three were definitely incomparable to that 5-man team they had pushed around earlier. He had likely stumbled upon a tough team this time. If he had only known earlier, he would have told the sentry to stop them and asked them to circle around.

However, he knew that it was already too late now. He and the other side were already at the point of no return — one side had to die for the conflict to end. Setting aside the matter of the precious power source he craved in the other's hands, the three members who had been sacrificed in front of him needed him to stand up for them and avenge them.

But before he could give any orders, six beams of light suddenly shot down from above, instantly striking six mecha whose operators did not have any time at all to react. Needless to say, these six mecha exploded simultaneously to become heaps of debris. In just a few seconds' time, the team leader's side was down by nine mecha. His initial grand team of thirteen mecha had been reduced to only four mecha in an instant — he had all but lost the upper hand.

The team leader stared off despairingly into the distance, and he soon saw those six mecha he had assumed to have circled around descending like gods from the heavens to land before him.

"Why did you all choose to get involved with this mess?" asked the team leader bitterly. He knew what his fate would be, but he just could not figure out why this would happen. Thus, he wanted to ask to find out, otherwise he would not be able to rest in peace.

"It's not that we wanted to intentionally get involved in this messy situation... we just could not be uninvolved, because you've intercepted some of our team members," responded Ling Lan calmly. She had initially thought that the other side would give them some trouble, but things turned out unexpectedly easy. It looked like there was no further hope of training up her troops.

"So that's how it is..." The team leader finally understood the resulting despair of being overconfident ². His luck was truly too terrible, actually stepping on the tail of an extremely strong team.

Just as everyone thought the team leader would just give up and surrender, unexpectedly, as his voice trailed off, the remaining four mecha who were still able to fight sprang into motion and began attacking ferociously. It looked like they knew their lives were forfeit, and so decided they might as well push forward without worrying about the consequences and take some of the enemies down with them.

The ones they chose to attack were Ling Lan and [No Mecha Unrepaired] because among the nine mecha, the only two intermediate mecha were theirs. In the opponents' eyes, trying to kill advanced mecha warriors with just the four of them was rather difficult, but killing two intermediate mecha warriors which were lower level than them was still doable.

However, they were doomed to be disappointed, because of the two mecha operators they thought were the easiest to handle, one just happened to be Boss Lan. She was the one Qi Long and the others recognised as the strongest — she was the horrifying boss who could crush them effortlessly even if she was controlling an intermediate mecha.

Meanwhile, though the other person was also an intermediate mecha, the pilot was a genius mecha mechanic. The control skills of a mecha mechanic might not be too remarkable, but the mecha he piloted would definitely never be as simple as it appeared on the surface...

Ling Lan gracefully flashed from side to side, drawing a swift streak of shadow through

the air as she easily dodged these attacks. Meanwhile, [No Mecha Unrepaired] did not even move. He simply raised his mecha's right arm, and the thick and heavy armour at his elbow suddenly opened up like an umbrella, instantly forming a large round shield. The surface of the shield was even emitting an indistinct sheen of light.

The cold beams shooting at him were all blocked by the shield, not causing him any bit of trouble. Rather, after receiving these cold beams, that faint sheen on the shield actually intensified, becoming gradually more opaque and visible.

Seeing this, Ling Lan's eyebrows lifted slightly, barely able to conceal her surprise. This shield of [No Mecha Unrepaired]'s was not as simple as it seemed — as a genius mechanic, [No Mecha Unrepaired] did not waste that talent of his.

Ling Lan and [No Mecha Unrepaired] had just dodged these beam attacks on their end when, on the other side, the team leader's party no longer had a second opportunity to attack. Four mecha were not at all enough to split among the other members of Ling Lan's team. Almost simultaneously, Qi Long, Luo Lang, Xie Yi, and Li Lanfeng moved ahead of the others and used their respective cold weapons to slash down the remaining four mecha efficiently. Even the strongest on the opponent's side, the team leader, only lasted one round under Qi Long's swift and powerful attack.

It could only be said that this party which loved to rob others favoured ambushes and group attacks too much; they were extremely weak when it came to individual combat. This made the combat-loving Qi Long feel extremely unsatisfied, and he could not help but grunt peevishly, "F*ck, what trash. It's really no fun fighting them."

"They are rather weak!" Ling Lan agreed with Qi Long's sentiments, but her eyes were sparkling as she looked in Li Lanfeng's direction. Their final attack earlier had undoubtedly pleased Ling Lan greatly. "However, we have still achieved one of our objectives. All of your attacks earlier were well-coordinated. Attacking all at once without actually overlapping in target. It's clear that you all have rather good rapport."

A clan was most afraid of lacking rapport, especially after the addition of new members. Ling Lan was not surprised by the fact that Qi Long, Luo Lang, and Xie Yi worked together well, but Ling Lan was extremely pleased and satisfied that the leopard had been able to determine who the others were attacking instantly and choose the remaining target. The leopard truly had not let her down.

"Not bad, [Self-Defined Destiny]! Next time, let us work together again!" said Qi Long

with a large grin. He too had not expected [Self-Defined Destiny] who had just joined to actually work so well with them. This made Qi Long's impression of [Self-Defined Destiny] rise significantly.

Luo Lang nodded in agreement with what Qi Long had said. Meanwhile, Xie Yi, who had initially been in the role of newcomer himself, had already been sympathetic towards [Self-Defined Destiny] to begin with, not as aloof as Qi Long or Luo Lang towards him. Hearing this, Xie Yi could not help but smile, feeling happy for [Self-Defined Destiny].

"This was just a lucky coincidence. I just hope that we can have such great rapport next time," replied [Self-Defined Destiny] with a smile. Even though he said it was a lucky coincidence, that was not actually true. The reason he had managed to work so well with the other three was because he had already deduced the accurate choice to make before he had attacked.

Chapter 315

A Nature-Defying Existence!

Although Li Lanfeng had not joined the rabbit's team for long, observant as he was, he had already gotten a pretty good understanding of the personalities and positions of the members in the team. In terms of mecha combat, [Lingtian Combat] only submitted to the rabbit, and in truth, he was indeed the second seat in regards to combat within the rabbit's team. Despite being extremely covetous of this position, Li Lanfeng also knew that he could only continue to covet it for the time being. His capabilities might not be any weaker than the other's, but he just did not hold the same weight ¹ as the other. From their conversation, he could tell that these people had grown up beside the rabbit; as a latecomer, he did not have the right to grasp for this position.

Li Lanfeng really wanted to stand by his rabbit, but he was not impatient. He would not impulsively offend the team members of the rabbit. He would slowly gather the team members' acknowledgement bit by bit and climb his way up to finally stand matter-of-factly by his rabbit's side. He would become the rabbit's undoubted best partner.

Ever since Li Lanfeng had become old enough to think sensibly, he had only wanted to change his fate, but now he had finally found a new goal in life.

"Boss, what should we do with these people?" Qi Long and the others looked at the remaining few enemies who were not dead yet but had already lost all will to fight, and then turned their heads to ask Ling Lan. Against these sorts of defenceless enemies, Qi Long found it somewhat difficult to take action.

Ling Lan did not answer verbally, simply gesturing with a hand to have them killed without any hesitation, appearing unbelievably cold-blooded and ruthless. They were currently doing a covert mission, so they could not let any news of their real capabilities get out. No one could be certain whether the enemies had activated any recording functions — only by destroying the others' mecha and killing them all to let them resurrect at the save point could they eliminate this possibility.

In Mecha World, other than the actual death itself being fake (those who are killed by

spectre abilities though would truly die without any chance of revival), everything else would be realistic. In other words, if a mecha was destroyed and the operator died, any recordings they made of this battle would be gone. Even if these people went back to rant on the official website, no one would be able to tell which team it was which had killed them. Next time they met, the other would not be able to identify them either, because they were all basically just using standard mecha at the moment...

Qi Long and the others saw Ling Lan's hand gesture and understood what Ling Lan meant. Without saying anything more, everyone neatly destroyed their opponents' cockpits and began smashing up the mecha. Of course, this type of destruction could not directly destroy all evidence. Still, Qi Long and the others were not afraid. Once this reclamation event ended, even if anyone came here again, it would take at least three months. And three months' time would be enough for these mecha to run out of power. At that time, even if this fight had been recorded and someone really managed to get their hands on the wrecked remains of these mecha, they would not be able to restore the mecha and get the recordings intact.

After all this was done, Ling Lan was about to tell them to continue moving when Luo Lang idly glanced at the item he had received at the start of the fight and shouted out involuntarily.

Everyone halted to look back in surprise at Luo Lang. Although Luo Lang looked sweet and gentle, his heart was extremely strong — he would never cry out over any small thing. For something to make Luo Lang lose control like this, it must be a great deal.

"Boss, take a look at this." Luo Lang ignored everyone else's gazes, instantly handing over that precious power source in his bag to Ling Lan. Of course, he did not dare to toss it, instead being extremely careful as he passed it over.

Ling Lan accepted it, took a look, and was instantly stunned speechless.

X192 high-glazed nuclear power source: a power source exclusive to planet X192. Overall capacity 10 thermie ². Able to sustain activation of mecha below imperial level, and has the ability to self-recharge. Recharge factor: On planet X192, 10 calories per second. In star space, 8 calories per second. On other planets, between 2 to 5 calories ³.

This was an absolutely nature-defying awesome item! In awe, Ling Lan changed the privacy settings of the power source in her hands to share its details with the group.

As expected, all her team members could not help but exclaim in shock as well — right then, everyone finally understood why Luo Lang had lost his composure like that. Because when everyone saw the item, they too could not help but find their hearts pounding in excitement.

It should be known that what a mecha feared most was running out of power. Once their mecha ran out of power, even the strongest operator would be a turtle in a jar waiting to be killed. And not only could this power source before them store such a large reserve of power, it could even automatically replenish itself over time. Even though the recharge rate was only several calories worth compared to its full ocean-like capacity and could pretty much be ignored... for context, it should be known that the most commonly used beam saber among Federation mecha only used 1 calorie per second... Once one equipped this precious power source, one would pretty much have an inexhaustible mecha. Everyone knew what this meant.

Among all the mecha in the Federation, only god-class IN mecha possessed infinite mobility fittings — this was also why IN mecha had become the strongest god-class mecha which drove all mecha operators wild.

Therefore, Ling Lan believed that once this item made its debut in the world, it would definitely stir up a storm of carnage and blood!

Ling Lan sighed softly and pushed down the frenzied cries of Little Four in the mindscape, then asked lightly, "This thing, what do you all want to do with it?"

"Boss can just decide what we'll do." Qi Long was the first to answer. He was indeed very covetous of the item, but he knew it was not fated for him. Using it on an advanced mecha would just be a horrible waste of this precious power source — even he could not bear to see this pearl fall into dust.

Han Jiyun sighed deeply as well and said in a restrained tone, "I think keeping it will be worth more than offering it up for contribution. I believe Boss can definitely become an imperial operator." Han Jiyun had full confidence in Ling Lan and believed that it was just a matter of time. If they gave it up here now, if they wanted to use this type of heaven-defying instrument suitable for imperial mecha in future, they would probably never have the luck to see one again.

Hearing these words, Li Lanfeng's gaze brightened and he stated firmly, "I agree with what Abacus says, Rabb — First-String can definitely become an imperial operator."

In his excitement, he almost called out his forbidden address for Ling Lan. Luckily, he had caught himself in time.

Even as Li Lanfeng was secretly rejoicing having escaped a round of beating by the rabbit, his heart was truly filled with confidence in Ling Lan.

The conviction in Li Lanfeng's tone caused everyone around to glance at him. In particular, those who had grown up alongside Ling Lan, Qi Long and gang, found their impression of Li Lanfeng rising exponentially.

It could not be helped; they were just like mindless fanatics when it came to Ling Lan. Meeting another mindless fan who idolised their boss just like them, it was exceedingly easy for them to mentally accept the other as someone on their side... It had to be said that these words of Li Lanfeng perfectly scratched the right spot for the group; this helped him set down a sturdy foundation for him to successfully become one of the team in future.

Only Li Shiyu could not help but purse his lips. What virtues and abilities did this despicable and shameless Boss Lan have to inspire such adoration from these followers?! That even a strange mecha operator in Mecha World was so trusting of him? Li Shiyu felt his three outlooks of this world begin to distort... till now, Li Shiyu still had not forgiven Ling Lan for her black-bellied actions in the past.

Of course, even if Li Shiyu was somewhat dissatisfied with Ling Lan, he too agreed with Han Jiyun's and [Self-Defined Destiny]'s suggestion. He too believed that keeping the power source was the smartest option.

[No Mecha Unrepaired] was an obsessed mecha modifier to begin with. Seeing such a valuable power source, his heart was already pounding violently out of his control. If there came a day when he could personally modify an imperial mecha, his entire life would have been all worth it. Right then, [No Mecha Unrepaired] did not know yet that his wish would actually come true in the near future...

Everyone thought that this heaven-defying power source should remain with them. Seeing that everyone was in accord, Ling Lan turned her head to say to Lin Zhong-qing, "Parcel, how much longer can those energy blocks of yours sustain us for?"

"Easily 10 days," replied Lin Zhong-qing assertively after checking on the stores within his bag. In reality, if there was not the concern that a large battle could occur to drain

their power, their stores could last them for up to a month without any problems. However, Lin Zhong-qing liked to be conservative in his estimations, unwilling to cut the timing too close. If by any chance anything happened later, he did not want them to be trapped in a dead end.

"Besides, our yield this time is pretty decent. At worst, we can still trade them for up to another 10 days' worth of power supplies," added Lin Zhong-qing.

With this answer, Ling Lan knew there was no longer any need to worry. She tucked the power source into her own mecha's bag and said, "In that case, I will temporarily take care of this precious power source. If anyone needs it in future, you can ask me for it."

"Okay!" Qi Long was the first to yell out exuberantly. Perhaps when he advanced to ace mecha ⁴ in the future, he could maybe ask Boss to lend him the power source just for the heck of it. This power source would definitely allow an ace mecha to be in an unlimited mobility state; that would allow him to get an indirect taste of the ultimate advantage of a god-class IN mecha.

Just like that, under everybody's collective decision, this precious power source was retained. Ling Lan's group of nine no longer tarried, swiftly moving towards the assembly point the military vessel's control centre had notified them of.

By the time Ling Lan and the others arrived at the assembly point, they found that there were already quite a number of mecha which had already returned. Of course, their conditions were not as good as Ling Lan's team — many of the mecha had not gained anything noteworthy. Expending so much effort for little to no gain, quite a few mecha were already grumbling at the redemption area that this was a wasted trip on their part.

This sudden interruption to their reclamation process had indeed cut short their time so they were unable to venture further in their search for resources. Mind you, every previous reclamation event had always lasted for at least a month. At some truly wild and deserted planets which were extraordinarily massive, the event could even be extended for up to three months. Thus, the mecha operators' complaints did have some merit.

At the redemption point, Ling Lan's team brought out all of the common material resources and minerals they had found over these last few days — perhaps the

military would give them some compensation for them. They had initially thought they might only get about 10 days' worth or maybe half a month's worth of power supplies in return, but the military actually gave them a month's worth of power supplies outright. It looked like the military actually felt rather guilty about cutting short the reclamation event as well, and so had applied some measures to compensate the teams that had participated in the reclamation event.

At 12 noon on the 10th day of their arrival on planet X192, all of the military vessels departed punctually, prepared to leave the gravitational pull of planet X192 to return to outer space.

The mecha hold Ling Lan was in, which had been filled to the brim at the start, was now at least one-third less populated on this return trip. A significant number of mecha operators had not been able to adapt to planet X192's environment and had ended up resting forever on planet X192 as scrap heaps due to errors in their control methods. Of course, many more had been done in by other humans... quite a number of mecha had encountered the same thing Ling Lan's team had when trying to return, becoming someone else's prey. Of course, there were also those who managed to transform from prey to hunter, but this would all depend on the individual's skills.

Chapter 316

Magnetic Storm!

The process of deorbiting from the planet went smoothly. When the JMC notification came over the official comms telling them they had officially entered starspace again, all of the mecha operators breathed a sigh of relief. Honestly speaking, they had also been afraid that the energy turbulence of X192 would occur prematurely and turn them into one of the scrap heaps on the planet. Even if they did not profit from this trip, being able to return with their lives was still good.

However, they had not been happy for long when they felt the transport ship's system begin to display signs of scrambling. The initially brightly lit illumination system of the transport ship actually began to flicker nonstop.

"What the hell is going on? Why are we unable to control the illumination system anymore?" The operations staff in charge of this facility in the transport ship shouted.

But before he could report this to the captain, another staff member responsible for a different system also cried out in shock, "Dead-ahead radar has stopped working. Not good, the port side has also stopped responding..."

"The surveillance system is unstable. We've got some white noise..."

Bad news rang out one after another in the control room. The captain broke out in cold sweat; without daring to delay, he quickly made emergency contact with the fleet's command ship. Only then did he find out that theirs was not the only transport ship to have these issues — all of the starships were experiencing these issues.

However, they could not find the reason for it right then. Just when everyone was at a loss, someone noticed that the star map of planet X193 not too far from them was different from usual. A ring of violet haze had actually appeared around the typically dull and grey planet.

This strange phenomenon made everyone take serious notice. After some specialists studied it, they discovered that that ring of violet haze was actually a magnetic storm, the very mention of which caused the expressions of the people to change, and this

magnetic storm was currently spreading out at an extremely rapid pace.

A magnetic storm was an extremely terrifying phenomenon. Anywhere it descends upon, everything there would be pulverized into dust, not a trace of it left behind. But even more frightening was the fact that this magnetic storm was unstable, liable to explode at any moment. When that happened, the magnetic storm would become a magnetic tsunami, sweeping out in an instant to consume everything in the surrounding space completely.

Knowing a magnetic storm had formed over X193, the command ship ordered all the starships to ignore the disturbance to their peripheral systems and just drive forward at full speed to escape from the danger zone of the magnetic storm. Here and now, at this critical moment, the dual-system navigation of the starships showed their true value. With the malfunction of the auto-piloting system, at this time, the starships' captains true navigational ability was put to the test.

This change in the starship was instantly sensed by Ling Lan within the transport hold. A strong sense of danger rose in her heart. Without even thinking about it, Ling Lan instantly let Little Four connect to the starship's mainframe and thus found out about the magnetic storm brewing not too far from them at planet X193.

Although the transport ships drove forwards with all its power, trying to leave the range of the magnetic storm, the speed of the transport ships was obviously slower than the patrol ships escorting them, not to mention that of the command mainship in the lead.

Little Four's knowledge of magnetic storms was obviously much deeper than those of the specialists here. He anxiously told Ling Lan that if his calculations were not wrong, the magnetic storm would erupt half an hour later. This half an hour was not at all enough for the transport ships to escape the danger zone of the resulting magnetic tsunami. In other words, if Ling Lan and the others waited patiently here in the transport ship, death would be inevitable.

According to Little Four's analysis, only the command mainship in the lead had any chance of escaping; even the patrol ships which were faster than the transport ships would not be spared... of course, this all still depended on whether the command mainship would begin flying at full speed from this point on.

In the command mainship, the commanding officer received a new command from the

mainframe. His expression turned ugly, and there were signs of rage on his brow.

Seeing this, his adjutant asked, "General, what has happened?"

"The mainframe is asking us to go full speed ahead and ignore the other starships behind us," said the commander in a deep voice after taking in a deep breath.

"Why?" The adjutant asked in shock.

"Because the magnetic storm will erupt completely after half an hour. Other than our mainship, the other starships have no chance of escaping," said the commander grimly.

"Then let us follow orders. Perhaps this is the best outcome the mainframe can see." A gleam flashed through the adjutant's eyes but quickly vanished.

"But there are several hundred thousand mecha operators in the transport ships. That's several hundred thousand lives there!" As a commander, he could not abandon his own troops.

"General, this is Mecha World, and we have a mission to complete. Even if this sacrifice were necessary in reality, we must still harden our hearts and do it," reminded the adjutant.

"Ah... look at me. I had completely forgotten," The commander slapped his forehead, smiling wryly. Mecha World was truly too realistic, causing him to forget that he was only in a virtual world.

Divested of his concerns, the commander decisively gave the command to move forward at full speed. It was just as the adjutant had said. No matter what, he had to complete his mission — even if there were some sacrifices in the process, he could not falter. His only consolation was that this was the virtual world, so he would not carry this regret with him for life.

"Boss, terrible news! The command mainship is already moving forwards at full speed. It looks like they have discovered the eruption time of the magnetic storm." Little Four, who had infiltrated the mainship's computers, sensed the change in the mainship's movements and immediately alerted Ling Lan.

Ling Lan frowned at his words. She felt that they might have fallen into a scheme of the mainframe. Enraged, she raised the right arm of her mecha and broke the secured

seat bindings holding it down. At the same time, she connected to the team's comms and said coldly, "We've been had. How despicable."

"Boss, what's going on?" Ling Lan's words sent a jolt running through the hearts of all her team members, who quickly began asking her to explain.

"This reclamation event was a lure. On the command ship, there are probably some people who have been officially dispatched to investigate the base camp of the Swift Dragons. Meanwhile, the rest of us are just sacrifices to give them a legitimate reason to get close to the base camp." Smiling coldly, Ling Lan laid out her hypothesis. Everyone's face could not help but change after hearing what she had to say.

"Our mission..." As if thinking of something, Han Jijun's expression became extremely pained.

"It's like First-String said, that is likely also just an excuse. The mainframe had never put any hopes on us to succeed from the very beginning," Li Lanfeng chimed in with a cold chuckle. "We're just cannon fodder. The mainframe is obviously playing a grand game of chess, and we are all just pawns in its game. The question is whether those people on the command ship are in the same boat."

"Who shall be whose pawns is still uncertain." That said, Ling Lan flicked her left arm and broke the bindings on her left arm as well.

This sort of unexplained vandalism caused all the mecha operators in the same hold to glance askance at her. However, the gazes of some of the extremely bored mecha operators lit up in response. They too followed Ling Lan's lead and used force to break free from their secured seats. Having been secured in the hold for several days already, they were actually full of resentment inside. Since someone had started it, they were happy to follow suit. Being able to just move around a bit in the transport hold was still pretty good.

"A path to survival must be created by one's own hands. We need to rush over to the command ship before the magnetic storm blows up completely," Ling Lan stated her plans. Only by making their way there would they have any chance of survival. Fortunately, a mecha's short-distance speed exceeded that of the mainship's. As long as they did not drag it out too long, they would still have a chance of catching up.

As for how they would enter the mainship, Ling Lan was not worried about that. Little

Four, who had already gained control rights of the mainship, would surreptitiously open the launch ports for mecha for them to slip into the mecha hold... of course, once they entered, they would certainly be discovered, but Ling Lan had no time to spare to worry about that right now.

At Ling Lan's order, her team members wrenched free of their secured seats without hesitation. Li Shiyu cast a pitying look at the other mecha operators in the hold and sighed, "These people... dying here is such a shame. Should we alert them?"

"If we delay at all, we too might become one of their numbers. When we can't even save ourselves, don't bother with useless mercy," Ling Lan chided coldly. She did not have the heart of such a saintly matron; let her first secure the lives of her companions before anything else was said.

Li Shiyu was still rather tender-hearted — Ling Lan had great admiration for Li Shiyu, truly, because a doctor needed to have this sort of tender heart. However, a dutiful military doctor not only needed to have this compassion, they also needed to be rational and cold-blooded if the situation called for it. They needed to react to the circumstance and be decisive, not hesitant in making their decisions. Ling Lan felt that on this point, Li Shiyu was still not quite there yet.

Ling Lan's words shocked Li Shiyu — he said nothing more, only quietly sticking to Ling Lan's side. He had recalled something his instructors had once said to him. *A military doctor was not only a doctor, he was also a soldier.* His instructor had once criticised him — on being a doctor, he was doing extremely perfectly, but on being a soldier, he was greatly lacking. On the day he finally understood what it meant to be a soldier, then he would truly become a perfect military doctor. At first, he had been extremely perplexed, but Ling Lan's words just now had triggered some vague insight in him...

"What are you all doing? Breaking the secured seats... do you not want your lives anymore? The unexpected turbulence from the high-speed flight will cause you all to be injured!" The JMC of the transport ship saw what was happening in the hold and could not help but shout in the public comms.

Some of the other mecha who were just planning to forcefully break out of their secured seats as well instantly stopped their struggling at these words. Indeed, so what if they temporarily obtained their freedom? If they hit any turbulence, without the secured seats holding them, they were very likely to be thrown into the air and

ricochet around the walls of the hold violently. Even with the protection of their cockpits, that could not guarantee they would be unharmed. They might as well meekly stay in their secured seats to ensure their safety.

Thus, those mecha operators still in their secured seats no longer envied those mecha operators moving around freely. Meanwhile, those mecha operators who had already broken free were starting to regret their decision. If they truly encountered some violent turbulence after this, they who had already broken free might really receive heavy concussive damage. If that happened, their loss would outweigh the gains.

Only Ling Lan's group of nine was unrattled. They pushed aside the mecha blocking them to reach the doors of the mecha hold and began thinking how they could swiftly break apart these doors.

Chapter 317

Destruction!

"Adjust mecha settings for outer space." Ling Lan rapidly changed the settings on her mecha, not forgetting to remind her companions at the same time.

"Yes, Boss!" At this time, everyone knew the situation was urgent so they did not chatter unnecessarily, calmly following Ling Lan's instructions. Very soon, the team had all set their mecha to outer space mecha mode. Receiving the OK from all her team members, Ling Lan abruptly pulled out Regretless.

Behind her, [No Mecha Unrepaired] saw this familiar weapon in Ling Lan's hands and a complicated surge of emotion rose within his heart. This was the weapon which had almost ended his military academy life, but it was also this weapon which had brought him to this bunch of great friends. Even as he was proud of himself, he was also grateful for the trust [Lingtian First-String] had in him.

Ling Lan's original plan was very good — let Little Four invade the mainframe of this transport ship and open it automatically. But unexpectedly, after the appearance of the magnetic storm, whether out of panic or another motive, some unknown bastard had actually put the hold doors in lockdown. In other words, it was no longer possible to use the starship's automatic system to open these doors — only violence would do.

"They want to destroy the hold doors and kill us all." One of those mecha who had broken their secured seats, only to regret it and blame Ling Lan's team for their rashness, saw this action of Ling Lan's and put old grudges and new alarm together. He quickly opened the public comms and yelled out to all the mecha operators present.

This cry caused all the eyes of the mecha present to turn to Ling Lan's party. Seeing that they were indeed planning to destroy the hold doors, the mecha were instantly livid. Right now, the transport ship was travelling swiftly. Breaking the hold doors would undoubtedly disrupt the movement of the transport ship and may even create wild air flow in the hold and threaten the operators' safety.

No one would be willing to see their safety threatened by another. This action of Ling

Lan's undoubtedly raised the ire of the crowd — all of the mecha that could move turned with furious faces and began gathering around Ling Lan, looking like they were about to rip this intermediate mecha to shreds.

"Anyone who dares disturb me, kill without mercy." Ling Lan did not even turn her head, but Little Four had already transmitted everything that was happening in the hold faithfully into her mind. The corners of Ling Lan's lips turned up into a subtle cruel smile as she coldly issued this bloody order.

For the sake of her team's survival, she did not care about doing some brutal and inhumane things to these people who wanted to stop her. At this time, the blood-soaked killing intent she had gained through the endless killing simulations within the learning space burst forth.

Everyone on her team sensed Ling Lan's endless killing intent, and the eight of them instinctively lifted the weapons in their hands and directed them at the mecha headed for them. With that, the tension grew between the two sides — it seemed like a great battle was about to commence.

"Who'd have thought that just a handful of advanced mecha would dare to fight against everyone in this hold? How audacious." A cold harrumph rang out from a corner, and then a special-class mecha could be seen walking out.

Qi Long could not help but scoff and then stand out. He was the second strongest on the team — with Boss focused on destroying the hold doors, this opponent could only fall to him. He did not feel afraid but was instead feeling rather exhilarated. He had in fact long wanted to try fighting a round with a special-class operator, just to see how much distance there was between him and them.

Qi Long was not so swelled with confidence that he thought he could defeat a special-class mecha. He only believed that his boss would definitely succeed in breaking down the hold door before he was defeated and save him.

It was precisely this sort of trust that allowed Qi Long to stand forward unflinchingly; of course, most of it was because this punk's desire for combat was blazing high again.

With a loud boom, the two mecha's short high-frequency blades clashed once, and then the two mecha brushed by each other. Surrounded by mecha, in consideration for their own safety, Qi Long and that special-class mecha showed great restraint and

used short swords in close-range combat.

[No Mecha Unrepaired] brought out two guns but did not use them against the mecha operators in the hold. He turned around and said to Ling Lan who was just about to act, "Leader, let me go first."

Ling Lan glanced at the strangely shaped guns in [No Mecha Unrepaired]'s hands and knew that they must be things created by [No Mecha Unrepaired] himself. A thought sparked and she withdrew several steps, giving way to [No Mecha Unrepaired].

For convenience of travelling, the team had not brought any weapons which could affect their mobility this time, such as heavy cold weapons or heavy cannons. This was also why Ling Lan had no choice but to handle the breaking of the doors personally. But now since [No Mecha Unrepaired] had weapons capable of destroying the hold doors, Ling Lan was happy to take a backseat.

Two loud rumbles rang out — from [No Mecha Unrepaired]'s twin guns, laser cannon shots the size of bowls burst forth to crash heavily into the joints of the hold doors. The entire transport ship actually began to shudder due to the heavy collision.

Quite a few mecha operators who had lost their secured seats were thrown to the ground by this abrupt great shudder. At the same time, this shudder had also affected the battle between Qi Long and the special-class operator. The two of them began to waver on their feet, somewhat unsteady, but as they both had extremely strong sense of balance and control, they managed to find their footing after just a moment. Still, due to this interlude, the two of them did not continue to fight. They faced one another in an impasse, neither willing to make a move recklessly.

[No Mecha Unrepaired] disdainfully cast aside the two guns in his hands. Although this thing packed a decent amount of power, they were one-time use items. These were defects he had created back when he had been bored. As the conditions in the town then had not been sufficient, not possessing enough sturdy materials to create this sort of laser cannon guns, he had created the guns from substitute materials. Thus, this type of incomplete one-use weapon had been created. [No Mecha Unrepaired] had not thought much of them, which was why he had thrown them into the recesses of his bag. If not for reorganising his bag before they had gone travelling, he would have completely forgotten he had ever created such rubbish...

Although the power of the laser cannon guns were formidable, the hold doors and its

interlocking chain were made from ninety-nine layers of the sturdiest high-density steel. The laser cannon guns had only blasted off several layers from its surface — this bit of damage was nothing to the ninety-nine high-density steel layered doors and chain.

The mecha operators in the hold had barely let out a sigh of relief when two more of the same guns had appeared in [No Mecha Unrepaired]'s hands once more in the very next second and were made to blast at the doors once again. It should be said that [No Mecha Unrepaired]'s shooting skills were pretty good; the spot he hit was not one millimetre off from where his first shot had landed, once again melting off several layers of the door.

By the time [No Mecha Unrepaired] brought out his fourth pair of guns, the faces of all the mecha operators in the hold changed. Hells, was this intermediate mecha warrior the Doraemon of legend ¹? Did that bag contain a never-ending armoury of weapons?

Frankly, things were not as outrageous as they believed. [No Mecha Unrepaired] had only made ten of these guns in one go back when he was bored. At most, he could only shoot five dual shots and then he would be out of ammo.

However, the mecha operators there did not know this. They thought that if they just continued to watch as [No Mecha Unrepaired] continued his destruction, great calamity would befall them. They did not want to die due to the insane actions of these morons here. And so, all the mecha that could move leapt towards the hold doors almost simultaneously, trying to stop [No Mecha Unrepaired]'s violent vandalism.

Having been long prepared, Li Lanfeng and the other five free members naturally would not let these mecha pass by their defensive line. Thus, a chaotic melee broke out within the hold. Fortunately, out of fear of the consequences of breaking the transport ship, everyone was using cold weapons. Of course, these mecha did not have many lethal or highly destructive firearms on them to begin with.

In the midst of this chaotic battle, Qi Long and the special-class operator continued to face off, their fight threatening to break out at any second...

The entire transport ship instantly became shaky due to the violent actions of the mecha within its hold. Meanwhile, the nebulous magnetic storm around X193 was becoming increasingly unstable. Little Four, who had been monitoring its condition all this while, began to grow a little anxious because the condition of the magnetic storm

was turning out to be much worse than he had reckoned...

When [No Mecha Unrepaired] was firing his fifth round, he gave notice for Ling Lan to take over.

Ling Lan knew then that [No Mecha Unrepaired] must be out of laser cannon guns, but she was still extremely pleased that he had managed to destroy half the thickness of the doors and chain in such a short amount of time. This had undoubtedly saved her a lot of time, and what they lacked most right now was time.

After [No Mecha Unrepaired] had fired his last round, Ling Lan stabbed Regretless at the joint of the doors in the very next second. Regretless' blade was extremely sharp; it actually managed to pierce through a little. Just this little bit was enough to light up Ling Lan's eyes. It looked like the sharpness of Regretless was indeed special.

Ling Lan pulled it back out again forcefully and stabbed it forwards powerfully once again. Finally, she felt as if she had pierced through, and she began pushing forwards with all her might. An ear-splitting crack rang out, and all the mecha operators who had been fighting stopped fighting in unplanned unison, looking towards Ling Lan with shocked incomprehension.

Perhaps they had never expected Ling Lan to break the hold doors so rapidly. After this shocked pause, they quickly regained their senses, but just as they were about to leap forwards once more to stop the other, a clarion voice rang out in the transport hold...

"If you all want to die, then just continue to stop us," said Li Lanfeng abruptly in a frigid tone.

These words made everyone pause once again, stunned. They looked at one another, unsure what to make of these words by the opponent.

"You think we're just fooling around? Who wants to die here? It's precisely because we don't want to die that we're doing this," Li Lanfeng continued to say.

Han Jijyun frowned at these words, but his brow smoothed out again very quickly. He turned a deeply contemplative gaze on Li Lanfeng, as if thinking of something. Meanwhile, the others said nothing since Boss Lan was not doing anything to stop Li Lanfeng. Ling Lan did not care whether the truth got out or not — as long as her destruction was not hindered, [Self-Defined Destiny] could say whatever he wanted.

The first to speak up in return was that special-class operator facing off against Qi Long. Tone cold, he asked, "What's the meaning of this?"

"According to what we know, a magnetic storm has formed not too far from us, and our fleet is within the eruption zone of the magnetic storm." Li Lanfeng decisively announced this news.

"What?" "Impossible..." "You're bluffing." Li Lanfeng's words caused the mecha operators present to break out into disbelieving protests.

The special-class operator was undoubtedly a level-headed person, otherwise he would never have been able to advance to become a special-class operator. It should be known that it was an extremely difficult matter to advance from advanced operator to special-class operator.

After a thoughtful silence, he asked, "How did you all find out?"

Chapter 318

Entering the Mainship!

"Because I am a hacker." Li Lanfeng did not hesitate to reveal his other identity to the crowd.

Hearing this, Ling Lan's hands paused for a moment, but she soon continued chopping away determinedly. During this time, she had already destroyed almost half of the joint of the doors now, though Regretless' condition was also becoming extremely bad. Still, Ling Lan could not afford the time to wince and worry about it — after all, when their lives hung in the balance, all else was immaterial.

"If you all do not believe us, you can ask the control room of this transport ship," suggested Li Lanfeng calmly, seeing that everyone was still sceptical.

Quite a few mecha operators stopped moving and began to contact the control room of the transport ship for confirmation. Once they received confirmation, everyone began to panic.

While the others were communicating with the control room, the special-class operator asked Li Lanfeng, "Even if a magnetic storm forms, a mecha would not be able to fly out of range based on its own power alone anyway. We might as well stay in the transport ship. It'll be safer that way."

"Sadly, the transport ship's speed is too slow..." Li Lanfeng only responded briefly to these words. As if thinking of something, the special-class operator kept away the high-frequency blade in his hands and said to Ling Lan who was still busily destroying the door joint, "I have a special-class beam gun here. Perhaps that might help."

Ling Lan decisively stepped away from the door, signalling for the special-class operator to come forth. Every second saved would mean an extra measure of safety.

The special-class operator decisively unhooked the special-class beam gun from his back and aimed for the joint which had already been half destroyed by Ling Lan. He shot a powerful blast at it, not at all stingy with the energy of the beam gun. In just a short 10 seconds, he had completely unloaded all of the beam gun's power.

At this time, the joint was already quite beaten up. Ling Lan was just about to move forward to resume her destruction when [No Mecha Unrepaired] suddenly said, "Let me try."

Ling Lan was taken aback — this [No Mecha Unrepaired] still had a card up his sleeve? Looks like a mechanical genius truly could not be underestimated.

Two missiles suddenly shot out from the head of [No Mecha Unrepaired]'s mecha — these were the anti-air interference missiles all mecha were equipped with. Their attack power was the worst among all of a mecha's weapons and equipment, so mecha operators generally very rarely ever thought about using them. These missiles were absolutely one of those things that had little value and yet was kept just in case ¹. It was very unexpected for [No Mecha Unrepaired] to choose to use them and attack.

A trace of disappointment was revealed in the special-class operator's eyes. Only Ling Lan's brow lifted, because she had seen very clearly that the missiles fired from [No Mecha Unrepaired]'s head were absolutely not that regular type of interference missile. Despite appearing somewhat similar, Ling Lan's keen and discerning eyes had nevertheless instantly registered the difference.

Sure enough, when the missiles hit the door joint, a tremendous blast rang out once more, completely drowning out the screams of those mecha operators who had already learned the truth.

With this violent explosion, the hold doors finally broke apart with a cracking sound. Seeing this, Ling Lan resolutely kicked out a foot to send the hold doors flying.

The air within the hold rushed out — quite a few mecha who were out of their secured seats were sent flying due to the loss of gravity, slamming heavily into the roof of the hold. Unprepared, those mecha operators who had been standing near the doors were thrown out of the transport hold entirely, ending up in outer space.

Ling Lan's group of nine had long been prepared. The moment the hold doors opened, they leapt out into space themselves. Witnessing that lovely violet ring of light that was becoming increasingly vivid in colour, they knew that that was the magnetic storm that could reap all life within this area.

"Activate all engines to their maximum. Move forwards at your mecha's fastest speed." Following this order, everyone on the team flew forwards at full speed, overtaking one

transport ship after another.

"That special-class operator is following us," Xie Yi, who was bringing up the rear, alerted everyone on the team.

"Don't mind him," Ling Lan said curtly. Seeing [No Mecha Unrepaired] gradually slowing down, she instructed Qi Long, "Combat, remember to help out [No Mecha Unrepaired]." Meanwhile, the others seemed to be doing fine on their own for now.

"Little Four, how far away is the command mainship from us?" Ling Lan asked Little Four.

Little Four answered, "Moving at full speed like this, we can catch up in 19 minutes and 47 seconds. However, let me remind you, Boss, that the magnetic storm might erupt prematurely."

"What is your earliest estimation for that to happen?" Ling Lan's brow was deeply furrowed.

"It's very likely to happen in only 18 minutes." Little Four directly revealed his latest estimated time to Ling Lan. As this was the virtual world, Little Four was not overly anxious.

What bloody rotten luck! Ling Lan could not help but swear when she heard Little Four's reply. Even though dying within the virtual world did not seem like a big deal — it would only cause them to drop some level points and at worst they would simply have to start over — Ling Lan did not want to give up just like that. In her mind, she was treating everything here as if it were real, just as she did with her assignments in the learning space. Only by using this sort of mindset to put pressure on herself could she find that single slim thread of survival in her missions and complete those seemingly impossible missions.

One more point — Ling Lan also did not wish for her companions to get into the habit of taking death lightly in the virtual world. Once they returned to reality and entered a real battlefield, this kind of mentality might carry over and bring them great disaster. Only by constantly being aware that they only had one life would they be able to maintain their vigilance on the battlefield and keep on living well.

Ling Lan believed that the reason why Mecha World was constructed so realistically and had such harsh punishments for death was in large part in hopes that the mecha

operators would cherish their lives in Mecha World. In truth, Mecha World had indeed succeeded on this point. Unless absolutely unavoidable, no one in the game was willing to give up on their lives easily. This was also one of the reasons why Ling Lan had drawn the ire of the other mecha operators when she had been destroying the hold doors.

"Right now, push all of your mecha into overdrive and activate the fastest theoretical speed of your mecha." Ling Lan decisively issued her newest order. Even if their mecha were utterly ruined by this, as long as they lived, all these losses would be worth it.

"Yes, Boss!" No one raised any objections. They all carried out the order simultaneously, increasing the speed of their mecha.

Meanwhile, Qi Long and Luo Lang did not require Ling Lan to remind them — one on the right and one on the left, they grabbed [No Mecha Unrepaired]. Revving their engines at the same time, they shot deeper into space like they were flying.

Seeing this, Li Lanfeng's gaze flashed. He was quietly amazed at the great rapport between the rabbit's team members. This rapport was something he was incapable of at the moment, but he was not discouraged. One day, he would be able to do this too.

Before Ling Lan had given her order, she had asked Little Four to send the flight path to the command mainship to everyone in the team. As long as they were not directionally challenged, they would not fly the wrong way.

The special-class operator following closely behind them saw Ling Lan's team speed up once more and could not help but curse silently. Without even having to think about it, he too accelerated after them. Although Ling Lan's team had already been moving at full speed before this, for the special-class mecha, keeping up with them had not pushed him to his limits yet then. But now, he could feel the strain, and there were even times when he was left behind by a significant margin when he could not react in time. He rejoiced internally over the fact that he was a special-class operator — if he had still been an advanced mecha warrior, he might have already lost sight of the other side a long time ago.

After flying at overcapacity for about 15 minutes, the whole team's mecha were all displaying damage levels between 15% to 20%, but their speed was showing effect — they could already see the silhouette of the command mainship. The group could not help but become infused with joy. As long as they could get on board the command

mainship, they would be out of danger.

At the 17th minute, they arrived close to the command mainship. At this time, a mecha launch port on the tail piece of the ship silently opened up. If Ling Lan had not sent over the landing point on the command mainship, they would never have discovered it.

"[Priceless Kinship], go in first." According to the team's flight position, Ling Lan called [Priceless Kinship] who was closer to the front to enter first.

There was actually danger involved in being the first to enter, because no one could tell what the situation was like inside. However, when Li Shiyu received Ling Lan's order, without having to think about it, he instantly controlled his mecha to aim at the launch port and slid in like a cannonball. Sparks flew when both legs of his mecha made contact with the rails of the launch port. Apparently, in order to decelerate, Li Shiyu had used the bottoms of his legs to produce friction. However, they had initially been travelling over their limits so their speed was really just too high — even by doing so, Li Shiyu's speed was not decreased by much.

Watching helplessly as his mecha was about to slam into the second guard door, as if sensing danger, the guard door suddenly sprang apart. Li Shiyu slid in smoothly, and though his own condition was not that optimistic, he still paid attention to the situation behind him. He heard Ling Lan order [Lingtian Parcel] to prepare to jump in next.

Very quickly, Li Shiyu had arrived at the third guard door. Just as if their entry was being observed closely, right as he was about to slam into the third guard door, it once again sprang open.

At this moment, Li Shiyu no longer had any way of keeping track of what was happening behind him. After the third door, they were in fact already in the inner section of the starship, which was where mecha were housed and also where they were prepped for launching.

Sure enough, when he had zoomed past the third door, on his mecha's screen, he saw the flabbergasted expressions of the staff members on both sides of the launch rails. Having received no notice about any of this, it was clear to see that the workers were extremely shocked by the sudden appearance of mecha sliding in from the other end of the launch tracks.

Very soon, a great commotion broke out on the scene. Many staff even leapt down from the mecha they were working on to rush over and try to see what was happening.

At the end of the tracks was a protective air cushion and many cords of bungee rope to prevent mecha from being damaged. Li Shiyu crashed heavily into them but did not receive much shock from the impact.

Without hesitation, Li Shiyu borrowed the rebound force of the bungee ropes to spring out from the cushion and swiftly dashed to an empty space on the right. He had not forgotten that [Lingtian Parcel] was right behind him — he had no intention of becoming the other's 'meat cushion' and end up with an internecine outcome.

At this time, the JMC in charge of the command mainship had connected to the public comms and was asking loudly, "Who are you? Where have you come from?" At the same time, Li Shiyu saw many of the staff members lifting the weapons in their hands, directing them nervously at Li Shiyu.

"Not good, there are still more mecha coming! Run!" Before Li Shiyu could reply, a horrible screeching noise could be heard coming from the launch port. These staff members were quick on the uptake, figuring out that this mecha was not alone in stealing aboard their ship.

The staff members knew very well that a mecha sliding through the launch port at high speeds could not be controlled. If they were not careful, it might simply crush them workers to death. To ensure their lives and safety, they had no more mind to bother with Li Shiyu. They all scattered to escape to safer territory.

Chapter 319

Secret Weapon!

The next second, Lin Zhong-qing's mecha also crashed into the air cushion, and he reacted just as quickly as Li Shiyu to shift his mecha to one side because there were still 7 companions waiting to enter behind him.

As one mecha after another slid into the military vessel, with even [No Mecha Unrepaired] sliding in easily with Qi Long's assistance, Ling Lan's worry eased. As long as the military vessel flew for another few minutes, they would escape the danger zone Little Four had calculated.

Seeing that her mecha's power was almost running dry, Ling Lan said to the final person by her side, [Self-Defined Destiny], "Leopard, you go first." Perhaps out of trust in the leopard's ability, Ling Lan had left [Self-Defined Destiny] for last.

[Self-Defined Destiny] answered, "Okay." But before he could control his mecha to descend into the port, that special-class operator which had tailed them all this way suddenly accelerated wildly to overtake them and shoot into the launch port.

"That special-class operator is too godd*mn shameless." Seeing this, Li Lanfeng could not help but curse. Leaving alone the matter of following them here, the other should still have known to be courteous and stay in line. How could he be so shameless as to cut their line?

Ling Lan frowned at this. That special-class operator had unexpectedly snatched the perfect time to cut in — that was truly a perfect 10-second cut. What a shame, it looked like the leopard would have to wait a while now. Each mecha needed to take a 10-second delay from the previous one before sliding in, otherwise it would be too easy for a collision to occur. If unlucky, the operators involved could be heavily injured and may even die. Although Ling Lan too was extremely annoyed that the other mecha had done such a thing, she could not let the leopard do anything rash.

So, Ling Lan said, "Leopard, wait another 10 seconds."

The two of them continued flying at high speeds to keep up with the mainship,

patiently waiting for the 10 seconds to pass. Seeing that the timing was almost right, Ling Lan was about to speak up to let [Self-Defined Destiny] slide into the port when Little Four suddenly cried out in the mindscape, "Boss, not good! The magnetic storm is about to blow!"

"What?! Didn't you say it was 18 minutes? There's still several seconds on the clock!" Ling Lan's expression changed drastically at these words. She had never considered the possibility that Little Four's estimations would be off by a few seconds.

Before Little Four could respond, a cacophony of the crackling sounds of magnetic disturbance could be heard within the cockpit. Sure enough, the magnetic storm had broken out, otherwise they would not have felt such a strong disturbance so far away from the centre of the magnetic storm.

Ling Lan and Li Lanfeng turned their heads together to look, and they saw the deep purple ring-shaped haze in the distance bloom like fireworks. It exploded powerfully, spreading out into its surroundings like a purple sea of flowers, so lovely that it dazzled the eyes. It was hard to believe that such a beautiful scene existed in outer space.

However, Ling Lan and Li Lanfeng could not appreciate any of its beauty, filled instead with fear. They could see the places where the purple sea engulfed had become barren — it was spreading at a rapid pace and had already begun consuming the transport ship which had fallen behind the most. The ship was turned into dust particles in the starry skies, leaving no other trace of its existence.

"Rabbit, you go first." Ling Lan had yet to ask the leopard to go first when Li Lanfeng beat her to the punch. He shoved Ling Lan beside him with all his might towards the launch port of the starship.

The power levels of their mecha were already at a critical red level — whether it was the magnetic tsunami coming from behind them or the power levels of their mecha themselves, neither allowed them to continue flying in space.

Li Lanfeng believed that with the rabbit's control skills, even if the other was unprepared, the other would still be able to safely slide into the launch port. Li Lanfeng only had one thought in his mind at that moment. Even if he met his end here today, he could not let all the rabbit's previous efforts go to waste.

Unprepared, Ling Lan had been sent hurtling towards the launch port of the mainship by Li Lanfeng's shove, but how agile were Ling Lan's reflexes? As she descended, she abruptly stretched out a hand and grabbed Li Lanfeng. Then, flipping through the air, she flew to the space above Li Lanfeng and lifted both legs to stomp forcefully on Li Lanfeng's mecha...

This was the rabbit's ultimate move Li Lanfeng was most familiar with, the stomp technique, which was a refined version of Rabbit Sky Leap. Due to this stomp, Li Lanfeng's mecha flew like a cannonball towards the launch port. He looked at the rabbit using the remaining thread of power he had to fly after his mecha, and his eyes could not help but become damp.

Once again he had troubled the rabbit; once again, he was experiencing the pain of being weak.

There was a type of despair in Li Lanfeng's heart. All these years, he had pushed himself desperately, tormenting himself to become stronger — although a part of it was because he wanted to overturn his fate, he knew that the true reason he wanted to become strong was so that he could one day stand confidently by the rabbit's side and become the rabbit's best partner. But now, from the looks of it, this was all just a joke. He was still all too weak — he still did not have the right to fight alongside the rabbit. The rabbit would probably disdain to even use him as a shield to deflect arrows...

Li Lanfeng hated how useless he was. He could only stare with wide eyes as the rabbit, who was getting further and further away from him, was chased by the purple wave, which kept getting closer and closer. It seemed as if the rabbit would be completely consumed in the very next second...

Right then, Li Lanfeng's initially wide teary eyes abruptly grew as large as dinner plates, his entire expression screaming disbelief.

That intermediate mecha of the rabbit had suddenly changed into a beautiful and eye-catching mecha in an instant. Even the mesmerising purple sea of flowers behind it could not conceal the radiance of this mecha.

Li Lanfeng was all too familiar with this mecha. It was precisely that imperial mecha that had been giving the rabbit an instructional fight back when he had first recognised the rabbit again. It was the only redeemable imperial mecha among the six

models available in Mecha World —— <Wind's Shadow>!

After switching her mecha, Ling Lan instantly activated all engines on her new mecha. For an intermediate mecha, the distance between her and Li Lanfeng would need 5 to 6 seconds to cover, but for the imperial mecha, just 1 second was enough to bring Ling Lan to Li Lanfeng's side.

Ling Lan grabbed hold of Li Lanfeng's mecha and said exasperatedly, "Bastard leopard, you've bloody gotten worse than before. Are you trying to commit suicide?" She had only kicked the leopard ahead of her because she had the secret weapon her dad had passed to her to rely on, but this fellow actually did not understand the pains she had taken to save them both. That self-sacrificing behaviour of his almost infuriated her to death.

Smiling, Li Lanfeng was just about to return a quip when he saw the purple flower tide looming above Ling Lan. He quickly shouted out, "Rabbit, be careful!"

Ling Lan abruptly turned around and plugged in that precious power source they had obtained on planet X192 at the same time. The fingers on both hands flew across her mecha controls. Under this type of emergency situation, Ling Lan's hand speed once again broke through her initial speed limits.

It should be said that due to controlling lower mecha, Ling Lan's hand speed had always maintained its original standards. Despite knowing herself that she had improved over these past few years, due to the constraints of the situation, Ling Lan had not known precisely how much she had improved. And now, on this imperial mecha, Ling Lan's restrained hand speed was finally fully unleashed.

"Pulsing King Shield." Ling Lan chose to use an equipped ability exclusive to imperial mecha even as she shouted, "Leopard, hold on to me tightly!"

Ever since Ling Lan had obtained <Wind's Shadow>, she had studied some of the special equipment of imperial mecha. Of course, her father Ling Xiao had also given her all of <Wind's Shadow>'s information. Combined with supplementary information from Little Four, it could be said that Ling Lan's understanding of <Wind's Shadow> was no less than those imperial mecha operators piloting <Wind's Shadow>.

Pulsing King Shield was a powerful defensive equipment. Although it was incomparable to the god-class IN mecha's Divine Shield series, it was still a top-class

shield among all of the defensive equipment of the Federation. It was a great deal stronger than the typical protective multi-particle beam shields most military vessels were equipped with. Furthermore, the Pulsing King Shield was a defensive shield whose range could be freely modified under a mecha master's ¹ control.

Ling Lan not only wanted to protect herself and the leopard, she also wanted to protect her companions who were already within the hold of the mainship. In reality, if this military vessel was consumed by this magnetic tsunami, even if Ling Lan possessed an imperial mecha, she would have no way of holding out till she arrived at the Swift Dragon base camp. This was the limitation of mecha — unable to fly for long distances.

In front of the imperial mecha, a beam of white light rose into the sky, instantly forming a large barrier with a radius of several kilometres. Even though the Pulsing King Shield seemed extremely large, it could still only cover the tail end of the mainship. This was already the extent of Ling Lan's control; the scale of the Pulsing King Shield depended primarily on the operator's level. Ling Lan's true control skill level was not yet at imperial level; she was currently pushing herself to execute cross-level control. Therefore, some of the special functions of the imperial mecha were beyond her, unable to be performed — some elements of the Pulsing King Shield fell into this category.

Honestly, for Ling Lan to be able to bring out a Pulsing King Shield with such a range was already extremely remarkable. Her control panel was already spattered with droplets of blood. Cross-level operation was not without its consequences. Ling Lan registered none of the tearing pain from her fingers — there was only one thought in her mind... and that was that no one in their team could die here under this magnetic tsunami.

A loud 'boom' rang out as the Pulsing King Shield and the purple wave collided heavily. With a jerk, Ling Lan could not stop herself from spewing out a mouthful of blood, and the initially radiant Pulsing King Shield dimmed.

Ling Lan bit down on her lips, using the intense pain to keep herself from fainting. She knew that every additional second she kept the Pulsing King Shield up for meant an additional guarantee for the lives of her companions.

At the moment Ling Lan had brought out the Pulsing King Shield, Li Lanfeng had obeyed Ling Lan's instruction to hold on tightly to Ling Lan's mecha. When the Pulsing King Shield and the magnetic tsunami collided forcefully, their two mecha had been

swept back by the fearsome power of the magnetic tsunami to hurtle towards the tail end of the mainship.

At that moment, Li Lanfeng was extremely calm. He only continued to keep a steady hold on his rabbit. Even if he would die like this with his rabbit in this magnetic tsunami, he still would not let go of his rabbit. Yes, he had already let go once on the friendship between him and the rabbit, so this time he would absolutely never let go again...

"Bang bang bang..." Their mecha crashed right into the tail end of the mainship. As the primary point of the crash, Li Lanfeng spewed out a mouthful of blood right after the first collision. The violent crash had caused him to be severely injured, but still he clung tightly to the rabbit before him, tenaciously using his mecha as the rabbit's 'meat cushion'.

The magnetic tsunami still came into contact with the tail end of the command mainship in the end, and the tail of the mainship began to emit violent sounds of explosion. Under the horrific power of the magnetic tsunami, even though Ling Lan had used all her strength in the Pulsing King Shield to counteract the force of the magnetic tsunami, it had still not been enough to prevent the ultimate fate of the mainship. The tail of the mainship was unable to escape wholly unscathed; over one-fourth of the ship was torn to pieces by the magnetic tsunami...

Chapter 320

Awakening!

After who knows how long, Ling Lan muzzily woke up and was greeted to the sight of dim darkness. Ling Lan could not help but be taken aback — if not for the fact that she could feel the seatbelt strapping her in, Ling Lan might have thought that she was no longer in the cockpit of her mecha.

Mind you, as long as there was someone in it, the cockpit of a mecha would always maintain a certain level of illumination unless something was wrong with the mecha; only then would this kind of situation occur.

Ling Lan had just thought to move when she found her entire body beginning to ache terribly. With that, she knew that she had already been determined to be in a severely injured state by the mainframe of Mecha World. It made sense when she thought about it. Going up against a magnetic tsunami which was capable of swallowing everything in its path, being able to live was already a great blessing. Of course, this outcome was also thanks to the impressive performance of the imperial mecha's defensive equipment.

Forcefully suppressing the pain, Ling Lan reached out to press the activation button of the mecha based on memory.

The resulting 'beep' made Ling Lan's heart ease. This sound was like music from the heavens, for it meant that her mecha could still be used normally. Very soon, her screen had lit up, and she entered the mecha piloting system. At the same time, the cockpit became bright again, everything in perfect order. Apparently, the mecha had just entered standby mode because no one was piloting it to save energy. The moment the activation button was pressed, it had started up again instantly.

Ling Lan did not concern herself with the situation outside. The first thing she did was to take out a tube of healing agent and slap it onto her body. Only then did she feel her condition improving. This was the virtual world, so recovering was as simple and speedy as that. If this were the real world, based on the extent of Ling Lan's injuries, recovery would not be as simple.

After sorting out her own body, only then did Ling Lan have any mind to spare to investigate her surroundings. She found that the surroundings of her mecha were just as dark as the inside of her cockpit before. She decisively turned on the external lights of the mecha. With that, she found that her mecha was currently floating in mid-air, and there were countless metallic scraps bobbing around her.

Seeing this, Ling Lan was quite baffled. Where in the world was she? The last thing she could remember was using the imperial mecha to block the magnetic tsunami and finally falling to crash into the mainship before falling unconscious. Could it be that the mainship had not escaped disaster in the end and had become debris in space? But if they were truly in outer space, it still would not be this dark!

In endless space, there was actually a certain amount of light. This sort of pitch darkness would not happen, so Ling Lan decisively threw out this possibility.

Just as Ling Lan was pondering this mystery, a voice choked with tears suddenly rang out in her mindspace, *"Boss, you've finally woken up! Boo hoo hoo, that's really great!"*

"Little Four..." Ling Lan's forehead twitched involuntarily. She had only been unconscious and not about to die — now what reason was there for this behaviour of Little Four's?

As if sensing Boss's displeasure, Little Four sniffled and said, *"Boss, you've already been unconscious for a whole night. No one was paying any attention to me. I was so scared!"* For that night, it was like Little Four had been shut into an enclosed little black room. The soundless world had almost driven him insane — it had reminded him of his time in Ling Lan's previous world. He had constantly been alone by himself waiting for Ling Lan to notice him, but unfortunately Ling Lan had only heard his voice right at the very end of her life there, making him wait for a whole 21 years.

Little Four was afraid that things had returned to how it was before. Having gotten used to acting spoilt and fooling around with Ling Lan, Little Four could no longer bear to experience that loneliness of before. He believed that if something had truly happened to Ling Lan, his processing chip would certainly choose to self-destruct.

"Don't be scared. Haven't I woken up now? You need to have faith in me, your boss!" Seeing this, Ling Lan's heart softened. Inside the mindspace, she lightly petted the emotionally wounded Little Four, comforting him to ease his fears.

"Yup yup yup, Boss is the bestest!" Little Four's tears had yet to dry and he was already smiling again. That appearance of his was simultaneously adorable and pitiful.

At the sight, Ling Lan could not help but fall silent. She suddenly realised that Little Four was not an omnipotent intelligence entity. He was just like a real living person with his own emotions — joy, anger, sadness, likes and dislikes, and things that made him sad or afraid...

Ling Lan silently caressed Little Four for a while, finally getting him to calm down. After that, she tried to pilot her mecha to investigate the surrounding environment but found that her mecha was tied down by something. Ling Lan zoomed in on the image of where she was tied down, and only then did she discover that she was being held down by the tight embrace of the leopard's mecha. It was clear to see that the leopard had not eased up on his grip at all.

Seeing the leopard's mecha currently completely still and silent, Ling Lan's heart stuttered and she shouted frantically, "Leopard, leopard..."

"He's fine, just unconscious." Having calmed down, Little Four saw Ling Lan's anxious demeanour and so told her about the other's condition.

Ling Lan thought back to when the two of them had been thrown at the military vessel by the magnetic storm at the end — the force of their impact had been fully borne by the leopard — and she could not help but feel guilty. *"He is only so terribly injured because he was protecting me..."*

"If you hadn't blocked the magnetic tsunami before that, he would not have just ended up terribly injured but completely destroyed. He should instead be grateful to you," responded Little Four, baffled at Ling Lan's reaction. In Little Four's eyes, [Self-Defined Destiny] playing the role as a cushion was the requisite cost for his survival. Why would Boss feel guilty and even feel grateful towards the other?

Little Four's words rendered Ling Lan speechless. She did not know how to explain to Little Four that his perspective was not quite right... knowing that Little Four was someone who only looked at pure cold logic, Ling Lan wisely did not continue discussing the issue. Instead, she connected to [Self-Defined Destiny]'s comms channel and began calling out to the leopard again and again.

Ling Lan was well aware that she needed to wake the leopard up as quickly as possible,

or else the other might die from his injuries due to not applying treatment in time.

Perhaps her cries were effective, for not too long later, Ling Lan heard a slight groan coming through the comms. Ling Lan was overjoyed and quickly shouted loudly, "Leopard, leopard, are you alright?"

"Cough cough, I'm fine. Rabbit, it's fine as long as you're fine," the leopard finally replied. His voice sounded very weak — it looked like his injuries were extremely severe, probably even heavier than Ling Lan's had been. It made sense. Even though Ling Lan had received heavy damage when blocking the magnetic tsunami, she had been using an imperial mecha. The protection afforded to a mecha operator by an imperial mecha just could not be matched by an advanced mecha.

In just a few moments, the leopard's voice began sounding more spirited. He too seemed to have picked up on the surrounding situation, and he asked Ling Lan, "Where are we right now?"

"I'm not sure either," said Ling Lan with a wry smile as she looked out at the pitch-black space they were floating in.

"I only know that we were hit into the inside of the mainship at the end. Who knows if we're still inside it now..." said Li Lanfeng after briefly rallying his spirits.

His words had barely faded when a corpse floated by the front of their mecha. It was dressed in the uniform of a mecha support staff of the mainship — they could clearly see the insignia pinned on his shoulder. It looked like they were indeed still inside the mainship. However, this also proved that this military vessel had already been pretty thoroughly broken.

Seeing this, Ling Lan's heart sank. If the military vessel had truly been completely destroyed, just based on their mecha alone, it was impossible to fly to the base camp of the Swift Dragons. Could it be that after striving for so long, she would still end up with the outcome of failing the mission with all of her companions dead?

"It's alright. Although the command mainship's condition is really terrible, its basic mobility is not broken. It is still in motion." Little Four could sense Ling Lan's worries and quickly rushed to reassure her, *"However, Boss, you are now in the tail end of the ship which was utterly destroyed. They have already sealed off the doors of the airlock on this end, which is why this area is in this anti-gravity state."*

"Then, do you know the situation with Qi Long and the others?" Ling Lan began to worry about her other companions who had entered first.

"I'm not very sure. Everything in the tail end has been destroyed, so I also have no way of using the mainship's surveillance system to find them," said Little Four regretfully.

"Since we're fine, I believe they'll be fine too." Ling Lan still had a lot of faith in her companions. In fact, that explosion at the tail end of the ship in those final moments was a death blow to those support staff members without the protection of mecha. They were basically all wiped out in that final explosion — the only ones who could survive were the mecha operators protected by the defensive power of their mecha.

"Rabbit, I seem to feel like our position is shifting. Maybe that magnetic tsunami did not cause fatal damage to the mainship." Li Lanfeng seemed to have sensed something of the situation, and he quickly communicated his findings to Ling Lan.

"Yes. Let's figure out the situation first then find Combat and the others. After that we can arrange our next plan of action." Ling Lan instantly made her decision. They would first look for their team members in this heap of ruins.

The two of them operated their mecha to weave among the debris. Countless corpses floated by them — it looked like all these staff without any protective measures had been sacrificed during that magnetic tsunami. Despite knowing that all these staff members were just NPCs, Ling Lan could not help but have a heavy heart in the face of all this death. Still, Ling Lan very quickly rallied her spirits. She began to think about how this was perhaps even more advantageous for her team because everyone who knew they had stolen aboard the ship was now dead. Perhaps they could change their identities and stealthily infiltrate the ship as official mecha troops of the mainship.

After a round of searching, they found no sign of Qi Long and the others. Ling Lan would rather guess that they had already entered the safe areas of the military vessel. What was more surprising to them was that when they happened to touch some standard Federation advanced mecha which were still functionally intact overall floating through the air, the system actually prompted them with a pop-up notification asking them whether they wanted to retrieve the mecha. This meant that these intact mecha could be freely taken by players.

Ling Lan and Li Lanfeng naturally would not let such an advantage pass by. It should be known it would require an extremely high amount of points at the redemption

centre to redeem these mecha. Moreover, Li Lanfeng's mecha was already running on empty — obtaining an advanced mecha with abundant power right now was undoubtedly a stroke of timely luck ¹ for Li Lanfeng. Mind you, once one's mecha's power ran out, not only would the mecha be unable to move, the oxygen levels in the mecha's cockpit would not be able to be sustained for long either.

The two of them chose two of the mecha in the best condition to keep in their inventories. It wasn't that they did not want to collect even more, but they would not be able to support the mecha even if they took more.

Within a player's inventory, each mecha would exhaust a set amount of power calories every hour. If a mecha was left unused in an inventory for a long time, it would still become a powerless empty shell of a mecha in the end. After that, it would merely be dead weight in a player's inventory and increase a player's fatigue level. This was also one of the methods Mecha World employed to prevent players from accumulating too many mecha so that the players would not end up unable to focus on training properly with one mecha.

Chapter 321

Comradery?

Looking at the standard military-use advanced mecha they had obtained, the vague idea swirling in Ling Lan's mind abruptly came into focus. She quickly contacted Leopard and communicated her idea to him.

The moment Li Lanfeng heard her idea, his gaze lit up. He felt that it was an excellent plan. Even as he signalled his agreement, he could not help but be secretly proud. *See, this was his friend. What a bright and intelligent rabbit!*

The two of them instantly changed their mecha into the standard advanced mecha they had obtained from the ship. Only then did they operate their mecha to move to the airlock's doors and make preparations to sneak inside the mainship proper...

Just as Ling Lan was about to instruct Little Four to observe the surroundings near the doors of the airlock, to see whether there was anyone out and about, they suddenly sensed the travel speed of the military vessel slowing down. They could also hear the faint sounds of alarms blaring from the mainship proper.

"What's going on, Little Four?" Ling Lan quickly turned to ask Little Four in the mindscape. Right now, Ling Lan was like a blind person — she was solely reliant on Little Four to obtain information on the outside world.

Little Four answered immediately, "Boss, the radar has picked up the appearance of an unidentified flying object about 10 kilometres ahead of the command mainship. The entire ship is now in emergency mode. It isn't suitable for us to act at this time."

Having heard what Little Four had to say, Ling Lan settled down to wait for a while. Meanwhile, Li Lanfeng too had figured out that something seemed to be happening inside the ship, so when Ling Lan suggested they wait, he was in full agreement, curious to see what exactly was happening...



At the distant base of the Swift Dragons, right after the eruption of the magnetic tsunami, an urgent notification came, requesting the Swift Dragon fleet to send a search and rescue team immediately to the surrounding districts of planet X192 to help the surviving soldiers and adventurers.

In one of the rooms in the command centre at the Swift Dragon base, a man shrouded in shadows sat on a sofa. In a hoarse voice which sounded grating to the ears, he said to another man equally obscured by shadows, "D9, do you think this notification is fishy?"

"D1, on the surface, this notification is exceedingly normal. Whenever an incident with great casualties occur, the mecha mainframe will definitely inform the closest fleet to send assistance. As far as I know, the magnetic tsunami of X191 is a natural phenomenon..." Any natural disasters that happened in Mecha World was actually a realistic copy of natural disasters in the real world. In reality, on the fringes of the Chinese Federation in the real world, there had indeed been an eruption of a magnetic tsunami on one of the planets. It was just that it had not been as violent and destructive as the one in Mecha World.

At this point of the conversation, D9 paused, then continued in a dark tone, "That reclamation fleet should also be carrying out their mission right about now..."

"What you're saying is, it won't be a big problem?" Within the shadows where expressions could not be seen clearly, D1 asked in return with his usual emotionless voice.

"Not quite. It's precisely because there's no problem at all that it is problematic..." A mocking smirk appeared on D9's lips. "We're infiltrators. We cannot let down our guard. No one can tell whether the mecha mainframe has discovered something."

"Then, pretend we did not receive the notification?" D1 followed up with this question.

"Of course that won't work. At the very least we must act normal and send a search and rescue team over, otherwise the mecha mainframe will definitely become suspicious. We still need a little time before Project T can be completed," refuted D9 directly, "The magnetic tsunami was so strong... according to the information we received, that reclamation fleet basically had no way of surviving... Even if there are any lucky survivors, having them be under our guard will be more reassuring for us."

That said, D9 added proudly, "The Swift Dragon base is already fully under our control. No one can carry off any petty tricks under our watch. If the mecha mainframe really tries anything and sends some people over, we will definitely discover them at soonest notice."

"In that case, let's send a search and rescue team! I too do not want there to be any disruptions before Project T is completed." In response to D9's words, D1 gave this order.

On that very day, a patrol ship departed from the Swift Dragon base towards planet X192. Half a day and one night later, when there was still two-fifths of the journey left to planetary sector X192, the ship encountered the sole remaining command ship from the reclamation fleet.

The command mainship no longer had any strength to fight, so they instantly sent out a questioning signal through the public comms. The other side did not delay in responding with their identity. When the mainship found that the other ship was a rescue team from the Swift Dragon base, all of the surviving mecha operators and staff members could not stop from tearing up. Over this past half a day and one night, their minds had constantly tormented by worry — they did not know just how much longer the battered mainship they were on could hold out for, and none of them wished to end up as debris in outer space like the other ships had.

The commander of the mainship and his adjutant looked at one another, their gazes a complicated mix of excitement and nervousness, and also a sort of stoicism. Still, very quickly, both their expressions turned as joyful as the other NPC soldiers below them.

However, the adjutant was still young after all. His hand could not help but clench in nervousness — entering the Swift Dragon base meant their mission was about to officially begin.

As the mainship really had no way of guaranteeing anyone's safety, after making contact with the base, the Swift Dragon fleet's rescue team began moving the people on the mainship to their military vessel.

Meanwhile, Ling Lan and Li Lanfeng took the chance while everyone's attention was drawn to the moving process to let Little Four silently open the airlock doors and snuck into the mainship. Using the route indicators Little Four gave, they very quickly arrived at the central mecha hall.

Right then, the attention of everyone in the hall was gathered on the two launch ports in the hall. The surviving 50 to 60 mecha operators were currently lining up to exit from those two ports and move to the rescue ship. Ling Lan and Li Lanfeng quietly sauntered up to join one of the lines.

The mecha operator who was originally the last in that line was startled by the sudden appearance of two new mecha and turned to give them a curious look. He was not suspicious, however — after all, Ling Lan and Li Lanfeng were currently operating the standard advanced mecha exclusive to this mainship (the identifying logo of the ship the mecha belonged to was displayed on the mecha's chests). At most, he was only wondering why these two had been so slow. Still, this was their own personal business, so the mecha operator did not pay much mind to it.

Seeing that this mecha operator was only looking at them but not asking any questions, Ling Lan and Li Lanfeng breathed out a great silent sigh of relief. They knew their plan to infiltrate had succeeded. Very soon, they had been ejected from the mainship and were flying towards one of the launch ports of the Swift Dragon's patrol ship. Once they had safely landed in the other ship's mecha hall, under the instructions of the staff member there, they operated their mecha adeptly to enter the secured seat arranged for them. After that, they chose to remain in their mecha, silent, making no move to leave their mecha.

The mecha operators of the Swift Dragon ship did not think much about the sight, because many of the mecha operators who had been transferred over were doing the exact same thing. The experience of escaping with their lives had tired out these mecha operators, and now they were safe, their high-strung emotions eased. Thus, after entering their secured seats, many of the mecha operators had instantly fallen asleep. Only a few mecha operators with bolder nerves had the mood to climb out of their mecha to interact with the staff members or mecha operators of the Swift Dragon ship.

Ling Lan and Li Lanfeng both just seemed like another member of the sleeping group, so the staff of the Swift Dragon ship considerately left them alone. In truth, Ling Lan and Li Lanfeng were actually having an intense conversation within their mecha.

Initially, with Ling Lan's and Li Lanfeng's change in mecha, their original team comms had become unusable. But who was Little Four? He had instantly helped Ling Lan and Li Lanfeng to secretly establish a private comms channel for just the two of them.

"Who knows if Combat and the others have also gotten aboard this ship? Would they also be here in this mecha hall?" Li Lanfeng swept one look around at the mecha which all looked the same and could not help but shake his head. He really had no way of finding the other members of their team from all these similar-looking mecha.

"As long as they still live, we'll find them. There is no need to worry." On the other hand, Ling Lan was extremely composed. She had great trust in Qi Long and the others. Having participated in an expedition team before, this kind of trivial matter would not trouble them too much. Besides, this was also a test for them — without her full protection, could they survive based on their own capabilities?



Right then, in another mecha hall of the Swift Dragon ship, Xie Yi had already struck up a good relationship with the staff members. All smiles, he rejoined his teammates and shared what news he had learned with them.

Qi Long and the other six had not remained in their mecha, because they were currently dressed in the exact same piloting suit as the Federation NPC soldiers and not their own individualistic clothes.

Fortunately enough, when the magnetic tsunami had caught up to the tail of the mainship and the explosion had broken out, with great teamwork and rapport, Qi Long and Luo Lang had grabbed hold of the special-class mecha who had abruptly rushed in and put him right in front of their team to be their shield. The other had taken the majority of the force from the magnetic tsunami, allowing them to safely tide over this crisis. (Of course, Qi Long and the others did not know that the reason they managed to survive was also because Ling Lan had blocked off a large portion of the magnetic tsunami on the outside, otherwise just one special-class mecha alone would not have been able to keep all of them alive...)

Of course, the end of the special-class mecha was most tragic. He had been instantly destroyed by the force of the magnetic tsunami. This was still the result of the other not reacting in time, activating his defensive measures half a second late. It was this half-second delay that had caused the mecha operator inside the special-class mecha to be unable to endure the force of the magnetic tsunami, hence dying instantly.

The ruthlessness of Qi Long and Luo Lang's decisive action caused the two new members, [No Mecha Unrepaired] and Li Shiyu, to quiver involuntarily in their hearts.

In particular, Li Shiyu finally realised that this team he had joined not only had a shameless and black-bellied team leader, even the team members were not very nice people... if he had been in their shoes, he would never have been able to use an innocent person as a shield...

Still, Li Shiyu's rational mind acknowledged the fact that Qi Long and Luo Lang's decision had been correct, because their choice had allowed everyone in their team to survive. Li Shiyu did not forget that even as they had grabbed hold of the special-class mecha, Qi Long had pushed him and [No Mecha Unrepaired] to the back of the pack, while the other three members had worked seamlessly with Qi Long and Luo Lang to shield the two of them. In other words, only after the five of them were dead would he and [No Mecha Unrepaired] have met any danger.

After the fact, Li Shiyu's emotions were extremely complicated. He was stunned and confused but also ashamed and guilty for the special-class mecha, yet overall, he was mostly moved. At that moment, he really just could not berate Qi Long and Luo Lang for their ruthless decision... perhaps this was what comradery meant! Li Shiyu's heart throbbed powerfully, and he found that he rather liked the feeling.

Chapter 322

Anxiety!

For these reasons, Qi Long and the other six managed to survive. Even if they had been afraid, they had been thrown by the explosion right into the middle-back part of the mainship. Of course, they had been severely injured in the process. Here, the benefits of having Li Shiyu had to be mentioned — he had instantly brought out the special medical agents he had developed. Their wounds which would normally have needed one or two days to recover were all mostly healed after several minutes.

Initially, Qi Long and the others had considered going to the tail-most end to look for Boss Ling Lan and [Self-Defined Destiny], but the remnant force of the magnetic storm and the low power of their mecha made it impossible for them to get close to the tail. Just as they were feeling helpless, [No Mecha Unrepaired] discovered a secret. The pilotless mecha around them could be claimed by players as long as the damage levels of the mecha did not exceed 40%.

After discovering this secret, Qi Long's group of seven was both surprised and pleased. This discovery meant that they would be able to find a way to go to the tail end of the mainship to find Boss Lan. They looked around and found that there were ten or so mecha they could collect. Those mecha had not been damaged too badly by the magnetic turbulence. The seven of them picked the best seven mecha and changed into them. Then just as they were about to go to the tail, they heard a mecha operator who had come to check on the situation appear in the middle-back area of the starship.

The magnetic tsunami had caused significant damage to the entire mainship. Not only were all of the staff members in the tail end dead, even some of the defenceless staff members and mecha operators outside of their mecha in the central areas of the ship had been killed by the explosive force of the large explosion. It could be said that the casualties were high.

Although the control centre of the mainship believed that there were basically no survivors in the tail end, they still sent a small mecha squad to go investigate. When Qi Long's group had first sensed the appearance of the mecha squad, their first reflex was to hide. However, Han Jijyun had an idea — he instructed the team to go up and

greet the mecha squad.

Sure enough, when the mecha squad saw them, the other side was not at all suspicious. Instead, they almost cried out in relief and excitement. They had initially thought that all their comrades in the tail end had died. They really did not expect to find any survivors... this made them so ecstatic that they had no mind at all to bother asking for the survivors' team numbers or any other personal information.

Just like that, Qi Long and the others were taken into the safe area of the mainship. When the staff there discovered that they were heavily bruised and injured, they were settled into healing pods for the night.

Frankly, there was a fatal flaw in Qi Long's team's cover story. Their mecha control suits were not the formal military-use control suits. Instead, they were using civilian control suits that Mecha World had produced in the fashion of those military suits, so their suits were still somewhat different from the official mecha suits used by soldiers. However, they were very clever — they tore up the most questionable spots on their control suits. Qi Long in particular had almost overdone it to the extent that he was almost naked. At the same time, they were also ruthless enough to hurt themselves on purpose, staining whatever remained of their own control suits red. Their bleeding wounds caused the rescuers to pay no attention to their control suits, placing all their attention on the group's injuries. This allowed the group to safely overcome this most difficult hurdle.

After a night of rest, they put on the military uniforms that had been specially brought over for them. As the living quarters of the soldiers had been at the tail end and so had also been blown up, all of their clothes and daily necessities were sure to be gone as well. The support staff of the mainship naturally had to think for their sakes. Not only did the staff provide them with military uniforms, they were also each given a standard official military-use mecha control suit. This made Qi Long and the others laugh silently to themselves, glad that they were finally safe.

Of course, there was one other reason why the mainship rescue logistics team was so quick to believe that they were mecha operators of the ship itself. The ship's JMC and the other staff members of the ship who were familiar with the operations of the tail end had all been killed in the explosion, every single one of them. This had contributed to the ease with which Qi Long's group of seven had infiltrated the mainship. The staff members instinctively believed that any mecha operators who were piloting mecha of their mainship must of course be one of their own.

They truly did not believe that someone could sneak in without a trace. Therefore, no one doubted the origins of Qi Long's group. They were all just sincerely glad that their comrades in the tail end had not been completely wiped out. The fact that there were survivors was a comfort to them as well.

There was one more reason they had processed Qi Long and the others so hastily. The staff did not dare to meet the pleading and questioning eyes of Qi Long's team. After the rescue team had found Qi Long's group of seven, they had discovered that the air of the mainship was surging out at a dangerous rate. The mainship did not have enough power left to maintain the atmospheric balance of the air within the ship. In order to ensure the safety of the people in the middle and front sections of the ship, the commander had no choice but to stop the search and rescue efforts and close the airlock gate in the back half of the ship to prevent the air from continuing to leak out.

Although Qi Long's group of seven had pleaded repeatedly for the search and rescue efforts to continue, insisting that there must still be other mecha operators alive in the tail end, the staff still did not manage to enter the tail end again in the end. Time waits for no man — they needed to do their duty by the remaining people. Thus, the airlock gates had to be sealed once more and the search and rescue efforts concluded prematurely.

The hopeful expressions on the faces of Qi Long's team had made the search and rescue soldiers feel extremely guilty; they felt as if they had done wrong by their comrades in the tail end. So after putting them into recovery pods, the staff subconsciously began avoiding them. No one was willing to go verify their identity, because they were afraid that the other party would ask about the final outcome of the search and rescue effort... just like that, Qi Long's group once again evaded another possibility of being exposed.

It had to be said that Qi Long and the others were very lucky. All of the surviving soldiers on the ship were grieving over the loss of about half of their comrades. Thus, they were exceedingly kind to the survivors, skipping over some of the typically necessary confirmation procedures. Meanwhile, when the commander received the report regarding the surviving mecha operators of the tail end, he too did not think much about it. He only gave word for the staff to take extra care of them and that was it. This was because at that time, the commander had been consumed with anxiety. How could he bring this battered mainship on its last legs to the Swift Dragon base? Who knew how much longer this ship would hold out for?

"The other party is indeed a rescue ship from the Swift Dragon base. We should be able to successfully enter the Swift Dragon base now... I just don't know how Boss and [Self-Defined Destiny] are doing right now. I wonder if they're safe..." Xie Yi whispered, finding it difficult to keep his worry from showing on his brow. Who knew if Boss Lan had managed to survive that magnetic tsunami?

"Don't worry. Who do you take Boss for? Since we all managed to survive, Boss most definitely survived as well," Luo Lang whispered back, his gaze filled with steel-like conviction. Luo Lang was the one with the greatest faith in Ling Lan. In Luo Lang's eyes, his boss would never be defeated, not even by such a horrific thing like the magnetic tsunami.

Han Jijyun nodded and said, "Luo Lang is right. Boss will definitely be fine. Worrying about Boss's condition is not what we should be doing now. Rather, we need to figure out how to infiltrate the Swift Dragon base seamlessly before Boss finds us." Han Jijyun believed that the true challenge lay ahead of them. They needed to begin preparations early. "Once we settle down at the Swift Dragon base, I'm sure that there will inevitably be a registration of the survivors of the mainship. Since we do not know the information of any members of the mainship we can use, at that time, we will definitely be exposed."

"If only Boss were here. He is a hacker, so he would definitely be able to obtain the information of those mecha operators in the tail end and give us some suitable identities." A trace of regret flashed through Lin Zhong-qing's eyes. He too had thought of this problem. As the mainship had been greatly damaged, most of the common soldiers had passed away in this magnetic tsunami. The staff on the ship had been so busy cleaning things up and keeping things together that they had not had the spare energy to properly vet the survivors. However, once everything had settled, both the commander of the mainship and the leader of the Swift Dragon base would be sure to insist for proper checks to be carried out. As Han Jijyun said, their exposure was imminent.

At this point, Lin Zhong-qing could not help but smile bitterly. Once again, he found that Boss Lan was truly an omnipotent existence for them. As long as he was around, any problem would no longer be a problem, able to be solved easily.

"Speaking of hackers, I seem to have heard [Self-Defined Destiny] say before that he too is a hacker. If he were around, perhaps we could also have obtained that information..." Xie Yi recalled what [Self-Defined Destiny] had said on the transport

ship and remarked with some regret.

"That's true! How unlucky. If he were here, we would be much safer..." said Qi Long in frustration at those words, "If I had known earlier, I would have let [Self-Defined Destiny] enter the mainship first back then."

"It's too late to say all this now. We might as well brainstorm and think about how we should deal with the situation." Li Shiyu interrupted Qi Long's tangent and reminded everyone to stop thinking about useless things.

Han Jijyun nodded and said, "Dux Li is right. The two hackers of our team are not here, so it's pointless to think about ways to get the information via hacker abilities. Let's think of some other way."

The group began to think hard, but unfortunately they could not come up with a good method. Then, Xie Yi saw [No Mecha Unrepaired] staring blankly at a corner. The other was still a second year student in the military academy now due to being held back two years. He was Chang Xinyuan who had been forced into dire straits because he had caught the eye of the Thunder King.

Xie Yi followed his line of sight but saw nothing there except a spider spinning a web... he stared dubiously at [No Mecha Unrepaired] a.k.a. Chang Xinyuan and wondered — had the other thought of something?

Chang Xinyuan seemed to feel the heat of Xie Yi's gaze, and he slowly came back to himself. He smiled embarrassedly and asked, "Xie Yi, you... what's up?"

"You were staring off into space. Have you thought of something?" asked Xie Yi curiously.

Chang Xinyuan rubbed his head in embarrassment. "I just never expected that [Lingtian First-String] was actually that Boss Lan who defeated the Leiting Mecha Clan. And it's even more unexpected that I would join your battle clan... this makes me feel as if I am dreaming..."

Xie Yi was speechless. When they had first gotten out of their mecha, Chang Xinyuan's expression had been calm and composed. Xie Yi had thought the other had not recognised them and so they had not paid any mind to it. Unexpectedly, Chang Xinyuan knew all about their backgrounds but was only showing signs of it now. Had he just pretended too well... or was his reflex arc just abnormally slow for him to only react

now?

Chang Xinyuan's words made the other people look at each other speechlessly as well. It had already been a full night since then! Friend, for you to exclaim about it now — isn't it a little too late?

The penetrating gazes of the other six made [No Mecha Unrepaired] rather flustered. He once again rubbed his head and said, "Actually, I was just thinking about those words Boss Lan had said to us when we had departed." Unconsciously, Chang Xinyuan had adopted the address of Boss Lan from Qi Long and the others.

Chapter 323

Clearing a Hurdle!

"What are you saying?" Qi Long rubbed his face roughly, suddenly finding that for someone with an impetuous nature like him, dealing with someone with such a slow reflex arc like [No Mecha Unrepaired] was really a kind of torture.

"Boss Lan said that, if by any chance we got split up, we should use pre-arranged aliases to find one another..." replied Chang Xinyuan.

"So you're saying that Boss Lan will use an alias? Impossible. If Boss Lan really managed to infiltrate the Swift Dragon base, he would definitely use an identity of one of the fallen soldiers, otherwise the other side will see through him." Qi Long was the first to express disbelief. An alias would be easily exposed once the other side checked their databases.

"But you all said that Boss Lan is a powerful hacker. Couldn't he have changed the database?" Chang Xinyuan did not know much about hackers, so he just shared what he believed.

"How could a database be so easily changed?" Qi Long could not help but burst out into snickers. Even the strongest hacker would never dare to do any hanky-panky in the mainframe.

"No, perhaps [No Mecha Unrepaired] is right..." said Han Jijyun, interrupting Qi Long.

Han Jijyun's words instantly shut Qi Long up. When it came to his sworn brother's judgment, Qi Long had full faith. Therefore, he could only rub his nose helplessly and say nothing more.

"Boss Lan's hacking skills are very formidable. I believe that anyone who knows about Boss Lan's ability knows this." Han Jijyun's words received emphatic nods from Qi Long and the other three of Ling Lan's original team. In contrast to Li Shiyu and Chang Xinyuan who only knew Ling Lan for a short time, the four of them who had grown up beside Ling Lan were well aware of Ling Lan's exploits in terms of hacking.

"Thus, who can say that Boss Lan really can't change the database of the command mainship?" At this point, Han Jijyun's eyes were shining, "I believe that Boss Lan would have already predicted our current circumstances. He will definitely add the aliases we agreed to in advance into the database, along with all the other relevant info."

"Once we're at the Swift Dragon base, if someone actually comes to check our identity, we just need to report the fake identity that has been arranged for us," Han Jijyun stated his decision.

"What if team leader Ling did not manage to change it in time..." Li Shiyu, who was not very clear on Ling Lan's abilities, was still rather worried. He felt it was somewhat inappropriate to use this kind of gambling-like method.

"Since there is the possibility of exposure no matter what we do, we might as well take the gamble. I believe in Boss Lan," replied Han Jijyun with determination.

His words drew the agreement of Qi Long and the other three original members. Seeing the determination in their eyes, Li Shiyu could only tuck away his doubts, sigh, and consent. Chang Xinyuan had no objections. As a mechanic who was focused on researching and modifying mecha, as long as the team has made a final decision, he would not have any opposing opinions.

Just like that, another day and half a night later, at 3 o' clock in the morning, the patrol ship safely arrived at the Swift Dragon base.

The Swift Dragon base, which had long been informed, systematically placed all the personnel from the mainship in a large battalion. Qi Long and the others entered the base calmly under the direction of the military personnel of the Swift Dragon Base.

They only took a few casual glances at the situation around them and then they stopped looking around. But those few glances were enough to shock them, because there was an on-duty soldier every one hundred steps within the Swift Dragon base. It looked like the Swift Dragon base was extremely strict in terms of manning the defences.

This was extremely rare among the Federation forces that were highly reliant on technology. It should be known that military bases generally relied on hidden monitors with three hundred and sixty degrees of coverage as the main means of monitoring, and rarely employed so much manpower for defence.

Qi Long and the others appeared unchanged on the surface, but they already had their guards up mentally. It would definitely not be easy to find their boss and complete the final mission under such strict defence. They were well aware that under the close supervision of these people, there were still countless invisible electronic monitoring devices watching them. If they showed any little flaw, they would be uncovered by the surveillance personnel of the Swift Dragon base, and the consequences would be unthinkable.

Due to the impromptu arrangement, the base was unable to provide excellent accommodation for the survivors of the mainship. Regardless of military rank, all of the survivors were assigned ten to a room. Of course, for those top-ranking officers like the commander of the mainship, the conditions were not as bad.

Qi Long's group of seven was assigned along with three other strangers to a room to rest. They had only rested for a few hours, not fully recovered yet, when they were woken up by a knock on the door. It turned out that the Swift Dragon base's support staff were already here to register their information.

Qi Long and the others shared a look. Han Jijyun signalled for them to continue faking sleep. One of the other three in the room opened the door, muttering angrily, and Han Jijyun perked his ears to listen carefully to their conversation.

Hearing that it was someone here to register their information, the attitude of the person who opened the door was tempered. He stated his information — the logistics head of the Leiguang mecha squad of the Jinglong mainship from the Dragon River transport fleet, Yang Yilong!

After the support staff of the Swift Dragon base keyed in his information, he smiled and said with a salute, "Hello, Second Lieutenant Yang, I'm really sorry for disturbing your rest."

Only then did Han Jijyun open his eyes to peek at the other's epaulette. It turned out the other was just a corporal — no wonder his attitude became so respectful. The status of a support soldier on a base was obviously incomparable to the status of a support staff on a military ship. This was also why all soldiers yearned to serve on a ship, because the starting point of those who obtained a position on a ship was much better than those serving on the ground.

At this time, the other people in the room had all been awakened as well. They rubbed

at their eyes, yawning. Seeing this, the support staff walked over the closest bed from the door. Chang Xinyuan was the one lying there and he was currently rubbing his eyes. Seeing the staff approach him, Chang Xinyuan's palms could not help but sweat, and the hand rubbing at his eyes faltered for a moment.

Noticing this, Han Jijyun, who was lying one bed behind Chang Xinyuan, quickly yawned and said, "Why don't you register me first? The quicker I'm done, the quicker I can rest."

The support staff of the Swift Dragon base quickly stepped forward in response to approach Han Jijyun.

"I'm Ji Yinglong, mecha member #5 of the Cheetah mecha squad of the Jinglong mainship from the Dragon River transport fleet," Han Jijyun calmly stated the alias they had set up. The reason he had pretended to be asleep at first was so that one of the other three strangers would register first. That way, he would be able to know the name of that mainship. Though this was not any great secret among the official soldiers of the mainship, as outsiders, they really did not know that information. Besides, he also wanted to know what the standard format of responding was.

With Yang Yilong's answer as a template, Han Jijyun knew how he was supposed to answer.

Han Jijyun's reply caused Yang Yilong from the same ship to do a double take. He stared in surprise at Han Jijyun, but out of propriety, he did not speak up to question the other. He too could not be certain whether his own mainship had such a mecha battle clan with such an unfamiliar sounding name.

After obtaining Han Jijyun's response, the support staff of the Swift Dragon base entered the information into the query system of the base. Then, he saluted and said, "First Lieutenant Ji, hello."

Han Jijyun merely saluted back calmly, but he was mentally shouting 'YES' in his heart. As expected, Boss Lan had modified the database. Otherwise, the other would not have responded this way. With that, he was even more certain that Boss Lan had survived the magnetic tsunami and had safely made his way to the Swift Dragon base.

Seeing Han Jijyun pass through successfully, the others' hearts settled. Moreover, Han Jijyun's answer also showed them what they should say.

Li Shiyu and Chang Xinyuan saw that Han Jijun really managed to pass through the registration check and could not help but be greatly astonished. They now had a brand new understanding of Ling Lan's hacker abilities.

Chang Xinyuan had originally already been extremely admiring of Ling Lan's mecha control skills. Now, he was even more awed by Ling Lan's hacker abilities. He, who had originally held out very little hope for the outcome of this mission, now began to have some confidence. Perhaps they would really be able to complete this SSS-level mission no one else had ever accomplished before throughout history... At this thought, Chang Xinyuan's heart pounded, but he very soon pushed down this notion.

Chang Xinyuan smiled wryly to himself. Hanging out with Qi Long and these other youths who were like young calves unafraid of tigers, he had unconsciously begun to lose his rationality, actually beginning to also have such unrealistic thoughts... but, what if, really, by any chance, they really... Chang Xinyuan took in a deep breath and firmly pushed all these distracting thoughts to the back of his mind. He knew very well that their mission had just begun — the hardest parts were still yet to come.

Meanwhile, this was the first time Li Shiyu was seeing Ling Lan in a positive light. That initially thick-skinned and shameless Ling Lan in his mind, who loved to manipulate others with petty tricks, began to have a positive image. Sure enough, to become an acknowledged boss, he must have his unique charm and capabilities...

After checking the information of everyone in the room and determining that there was no problem, the Swift Dragon support staff left the room. At this time, Yang Yilong loudly asked Qi Long, "Captain Luo (Qi Long's alias was Luo Ying), who'd expect that you're actually member #2 of the Cheetah mecha team. That's the position of the team ace, you know!"

Typically, #1 was the team leader, #2 was the main ace of the team, #3 was the secondary ace, #4 was a primary fighter, while #5 and beyond were indefinite. Those numbers could be support and logistics members, or they could also be primary fighters. Although Yang Yilong felt that the name of the Cheetah mecha team sounded very unfamiliar, he still expressed his admiration for Qi Long's position.

Qi Long scratched his head in embarrassment and said with a smile, "I'm no ace, our team leader is..."

His earnest face and this smile made him appear somewhat dopey, but gave others a

feeling of extreme sincerity and trustworthiness. Yang Yilong could not help but find himself liking Qi Long.

Yang Yilong exchanged a few more words with Qi Long. When he heard that they still did not know whether their team leader and their #7 member was dead or alive, he was instantly filled with pity. Seeing this, Qi Long angrily said that he believed that his team leader still lived. This heartfelt display of Qi Long's absolute trust made Yang Yilong admire Qi Long even more. That little bit of doubt initially still present in his heart vanished without a trace at this performance of Qi Long's.

When Han Jijyun saw this, he let out a quiet sigh of relief. When he had responded earlier, he had already been worried that the unfamiliar name of the mecha team would arouse suspicion in the minds of the mainship's members. Luckily, Qi Long's appearance was very handy for deceiving others. At the very least, judging from Yang Yilong's present expression, he had not become suspicious of them.

Chapter 324

The Truth!

At this time, in another room, Ling Lan and Li Lanfeng who had already finished registering were currently laid out on their beds, resting.

Not too long after, Ling Lan received a text message. She flicked open her communicator to look and was instantly immensely excited. In the very next second, she had extremely impolitely kicked at Li Lanfeng on the upper bunk.

Feeling the force coming from his mattress, Li Lanfeng sat up in puzzlement. Before he could ask Ling Lan on the bunk below what had happened, Ling Lan said, "There's news of #2 and the others. Clean up quickly and let's go look for them."

Li Lanfeng's eyes lit up. He put on a jacket and then leapt off the bed to follow Ling Lan heading towards where Qi Long was staying.

The reason Ling Lan received this news so quickly was not because of Little Four's abilities. Of course, if Qi Long and the others' information were to be registered, Little Four, who was already lurking in the network of the Swift Dragon base, would definitely be able to obtain the news at soonest notice. However, in order to let everything seem natural and above-board, when she had registered herself, Ling Lan had generously bribed the support staff of the Swift Dragon base. Of course, she had also let Li Lanfeng utilise that natural ability of his to gain favour with others and intensify the other side's good impression of them, thus successfully securing the other's agreement to help them.

In reality, right when Qi Long and the others' information had been registered, Ling Lan had already been notified by Little Four. However, Ling Lan had kept calm and continued to lay on her bed as if she knew nothing. Only when she received the notification from that support staff did she pretend to be excited and take action.

Of course, the other was not breaking any rules of the base by helping them. After all, Ling Lan and Li Lanfeng were just trying to find their comrades who had gotten split up from them — it's not like they were trying to inquire about the secrets of the base. Moreover, right now within the Swift Dragon base, Ling Lan was not the only person

who was doing this. Many other soldiers who had been separated from their original teammates for various reasons had similarly put forward such requests. Ling Lan had only included an additional minor reward when she had made her request.

This reward was very simple — it was just a bottle of high proof liquor Ling Lan had on her for first-aid purposes. Under Little Four's assistance, Ling Lan had found out that this person's hobby was to drink.

As for why Ling Lan would have such high proof liquor on her... ahem, ahem, this was actually a remnant habit Ling Lan had brought over from her last life lying on her sickbed. Having gotten used to the idea that alcohol should be used on wounds to sterilize them, she really could not adapt to this world where no prep work was done, with healing agents being directly sprayed or applied onto open wounds and leaving it at that.

Mentally, Ling Lan had always had some fear with regards to this sort of treatment method. What if, by any chance, there was tetanus or something similar about? Wasn't this just asking for trouble? Therefore, she habitually carried several bottles of high-proof liquor with her in her backpack. If she was injured accidentally, she would open one of the bottles to use the alcohol in it to disinfect the wound before spraying healing agents on it...

With regards to this habit of Ling Lan's, although Qi Long and the others were puzzled by it, they would never question her. They only speculated secretly whether this was because their boss liked alcohol but was forbidden by his parents to drink... could this be why he had sought out such an unreasonable reason?

It could only be said that some things were already ingrained habits of Ling Lan's. It was impossible for her to change them in a short period of time. Thus, without her knowledge, Ling Lan had become someone who liked to drink in her team members' eyes ¹.

Back when Ling Lan had brought out the liquor and handed it over as an incentive for the support staff, even Li Lanfeng could not help but sweatdrop silently and wonder if Ling Lan was an alcohol-loving rabbit — why else would he think of using alcohol as a bribe?

Still, for whatever reason, overall, Ling Lan's reward had pleased that support staff greatly. Consequently, the other was extremely cooperative, almost notifying them at

first notice. This led Li Lanfeng to once again be in awe — the seemingly random and reckless actions of the rabbit always seemed to end up being extremely effective.

The two of them very quickly found the resting spot of Qi Long and the others and knocked on the door.

The one who opened the door was again Yang Yilong — who asked him to be the one sleeping on the bed closest to the door? Opening the door, he saw two strangers, so he asked, "Who are you looking for?"

"Is Luo Ying and company here?" asked Ling Lan coldly. That icy gaze of hers made Yang Yilong feel a chill invade his heart — he quickly ducked back into the room and shouted, "Captain Luo, someone's looking for you."

Hearing this, Qi Long's eyes lit up and he leapt off his top bunk to rush over with wide steps to the door. Seeing his boss's familiar face, he was instantly overwhelmed with emotion, "Leader, you've finally come!"

Qi Long's cry of leader made the other members inside the room leap up in excitement, all of them running over as well.

Yang Yilong was astonished at the sight, but thinking of the impression that person at the doorway had given him, he understood why these mecha team members would be so worked up. Only someone like that could gain the allegiance of proud mecha warriors. With just one glance, Yang Yilong could tell that that team leader was most definitely a formidable warrior. This was because he had felt a similar pressure from the team leader of the Leiguang Battle Clan.

Seeing his other two companions peeking out from their beds, nonverbally asking who the visitor was, Yang Yilong silently indicated for them to remain silent and continue to sleep and not disturb the group.

A mecha team leader was an existence high, high above them mecha support staff — he did not want to incur the displeasure of that team leader.

Qi Long and the others hugged Ling Lan excitedly in succession, and only then did they see the familiar smiling face standing by Ling Lan's side. Other than [No Mecha Unrepaired], all the others could not help but be taken aback, especially Li Shiyu, whose face actually stiffened noticeably for a brief moment.

Seeing this, Li Lanfeng smiled wryly and said, "#8, for previously planning to try and snatch your position in the team from you out of envy, I'm sorry. The crisis this time has let me understand that status, levels, and whatever are all not important. What's most important is my companions. I hope you can forgive me."

Li Shiyu only huffed at those words and turned his head aside without speaking. He knew his own expression had been slightly off — if some surveillance device had just happened to record it, a flaw might have already been discovered. Li Lanfeng was undoubtedly trying to help him hide his slip in composure, but he was just unused to acting and really did not know how to handle the situation.

Seeing this, Xie Yi tugged on Li Shiyu's arm and said, "All of us being able to survive is already a blessing. Why bother with things of the past? Don't you agree, #8?"

Li Shiyu saw everyone looking at him with smiles on their faces and could only reply grudgingly, "Forget it. Let's not talk about past matters anymore."

Only then did Li Lanfeng sigh in relief. He stepped forward to pull Li Shiyu into a strong hug and said, "Thank you, brother, for your tolerance and understanding..." Only Li Lanfeng knew that he was not just putting on an act when he said this... he truly hoped that, one day in the future, Li Shiyu could say these same words back to him. However, Li Lanfeng also knew that this was probably an impossible dream.

Seeing this, Ling Lan clapped her hands together forcefully and said, "It's great that you two have buried the hatchet. In future, we must be united. We shouldn't fight amongst ourselves anymore." Ling Lan's words marked the end of the matter, and the group happily welcomed Ling Lan and Li Lanfeng into their room.

Meanwhile, Li Lanfeng latched onto Li Shiyu and the two of them moved to sit on Li Shiyu's bed, where they began whispering to one another. It looked like they had truly buried the hatchet.

Only Li Lanfeng himself knew that despite his seeming composure, he was actually greatly shocked. When he had first seen Li Shiyu, as good as he was at deception, he had almost slipped up and reacted. That bloody Ling Lan had not given him a heads up that his family's Li Shiyu had also joined the battle clan.

Seeing Li Shiyu's face filled with innocence, Li Lanfeng could not help but sigh internally. What in the world did their Li family owe Ling Lan? Not only had he joined,

even Li Shiyu who should not have been able to join had joined... still, he could not help but become smug deep inside. As expected of his rabbit — able to do what others could not.

If he had the rabbit's help in the future, would he too be able to escape his so-called fate...? Li Lanfeng's gaze flickered but very quickly settled as he tossed aside this idiotic notion of his. He absolutely could not harm the rabbit. To go against the heavens and change his fate, a terrible price would have to be paid. Grandfather Zhuge had already stated this very clearly from the start. And this price, could very well be his life.

Although Li Lanfeng was physically speaking with Li Shiyu, his mind was distracted in recalling when he and Ling Lan had first seen each other's true faces in this virtual world not too long ago.

When they had arrived at the Swift Dragon base, Ling Lan and Li Lanfeng naturally had to leave their mecha. Of course, they had it much easier than Qi Long and the others because in the virtual world, both Ling Lan and Li Lanfeng were miraculous beings. Because she had Little Four, Ling Lan could easily change her original civilian mecha suit into an official military mecha suit. Meanwhile, Li Lanfeng was a spectre, and though he could not directly change the fixed settings of the virtual world, he could apply a disguise to himself. Thus, when the two had come out from their mecha, their appearance was flawless, no different at all from the other mecha operators.

However, when Ling Lan and Li Lanfeng had met face-to-face for the first time after getting out from their mecha, Li Lanfeng had almost stumbled and revealed his true feelings. If not for the fact that his spectre abilities also hid his expression, his flabbergasted expression would certainly have aroused suspicion in those around him.

In contrast, Ling Lan's ice mask had long been formed, so it did not collapse even when she had seen Li Lanfeng.

"Boss...!" Li Lanfeng bit back on the 'Lan' that had been about to come out, stopping his outburst at only 'boss', making it seem like he was just greeting his own team leader.

"#9, keep up." Ling Lan's glacial gaze had contained a hidden warning. Although others may not be able to see Li Lanfeng's true expression, perhaps because she was way too

familiar with the leopard, Ling Lan had still sensed Li Lanfeng's loss of composure.

This gaze made Li Lanfeng's initially shocked and restless heart cool down instantly. He bowed his head and cuffed his own forehead lightly, chiding himself for his slip. They had both not known about the other, but Ling Lan had still been able to keep calm. In terms of mentality, he had completely lost to the rabbit who was younger than him by three years. This made him feel somewhat embarrassed.

Right then, Li Lanfeng was not at all surprised at why Ling Lan could have logged onto Mecha World at just 10 years old back then. As someone who was able to create a similar disguise as him now, Ling Lan was undoubtedly a spectre just like him. And for spectres in the virtual world, all those so-called restrictions and limits were all inapplicable. None of it could prevent them from moving about as they wished. Thus, for Ling Lan to be able to enter Mecha World at just 10 years old was completely believable.

That said, Li Lanfeng could not help but sigh to himself. At 10 years old, Ling Lan's spectre abilities had actually been strong enough that he had not noticed a thing. No wonder they had had such affinity back then — even if he had entered the mecha training hall first, the rabbit had still always been able to come unerringly to the training hall he had chosen. Now, thinking back, Ling Lan must have used his own spectre abilities to find where he was.

Was this proof that the rabbit had held him with just as much esteem as he had back then? Which was why the other had used spectre abilities to look for his position and stage a coincidental meeting?

Li Lanfeng felt a surge of warmth in his heart. It looked like his friendship had not been one-sided back then. If he had only told Ling Lan bravely about his real identity back then, perhaps they would be bosom friends now and he would not be ranked behind the other companions of the rabbit.

Right then, a trace of regret rose up uncontrollably in Li Lanfeng's heart. However, it was quickly throttled by him, because he did not think it was too late to change things.

In this manner, although Li Lanfeng's heart had struggled a little, he still accepted Ling Lan. After all, Ling Lan was younger than him by 3 years, while the rabbit had always been a formidable existence in his heart, a strong person he admired. As such, it was exceedingly normal for him to flounder a little to reconcile the difference between the

two impressions. Still, these were all minor blips. Li Lanfeng would never bear to give up the rabbit he had missed for so long and had spent 7 years to find.

Meanwhile, when Ling Lan found out the true identity of the leopard, her first thought was — sure enough, the leopard was very dangerous. Her second thought was — the leopard was truly not a good person!

Still, Ling Lan did not mind. As long as the leopard treated her with sincerity and did not harm her companions, she would not care what terrible things the leopard would do in the future. She would still be willing to save a spot for the leopard in her battle clan.

Of course, at present, this was all the weight Li Lanfeng had in Ling Lan's heart. In contrast, if Qi Long and the others planned to do something bad, Ling Lan would definitely roll up her sleeves and pitch in to come up with strategies to help them.

Fine, our queen Ling Lan indeed did not have any so-called true sense of justice in her. She only wanted to take good care of these little followers who trusted her and were willing to follow her, as well as cultivate them to become strong people capable of holding their own in their respective fields.

Chapter 325

The Mantis Stalking the Cicada!

The survivors of the mainship obtained the chance to rest at the Swift Dragon base. Given that the Jinglong mainship had no way to travel long distances, they could only wait for the Federation army to send a new military vessel to pick them up.

After resting peacefully for three days and two nights, when the new mainship members heard that a new military vessel was about to arrive for them in two days, they were ecstatic. Even though they had been treated pretty well overall in the Swift Dragon base, they had still felt significantly restrained. The mainship members had been restricted to a small living area; for many other places on the base, they simply could not even get close. This made the fleet soldiers who were accustomed to being able to freely move around to feel extremely inconvenienced.

On this night, in a highly-defended area within the Swift Dragon base, several figures appeared silently not too far from the entrance. They lurked at the blind spot in the distance...

"You're sure this is the spot?" Someone who appeared to be the commanding officer gestured as he asked the person beside him.

This group of people were wearing advanced induction combat clothing of the Federation military, which could buffer the human body from the outside air and perfectly camouflage the soldiers according to their surrounding environment. Once the soldiers laid down and stopped moving, it would be nigh impossible for even the most advanced radar detectors, thermal monitors, and the human eye to discover them.

The only reason we say 'nigh' is because there is nothing which can be guaranteed to be foolproof — there would always be the possibility of what if.

"Only this spot is most closely defended." The person beside the apparent commander returned a confident hand gesture.

"Have all the surveillance devices been blocked?" The commander turned to look

towards another side, his gaze indicating that he wanted to confirm whether his men had completed the most critical step.

There were actually three people on his other side. One of them, who seemed to be their head, saw the question in the commander's eyes and nodded, signalling that it had been done.

It could be seen from their faces that it had not been easy to complete this step. Other than the one who had nodded, whose condition still seemed fine, the other two people had faint tracks of sweat on their foreheads and their faces were extremely grim. It looked like the two of them had already put forth all their energy to completely block off all the surveillance equipment and create false images.

"How long can it last?" After seeing the other's response, the commander then asked in a low voice.

"At most for only one hour and a quarter more. If possible, please try to come out within an hour," said the head grimly. He had not expected the defences of the Swift Dragon base to be so tight — in particular, there was an abnormal number of all kinds of advanced surveillance equipment. This had exceeded their estimation. If they had known earlier, they would have brought along the other two members of their team as well.

"One hour, is it? There should be enough time." The commander mused a little and felt that it was not a huge problem. Honestly, even if the problem was huge, he still had to go inside and investigate. Hadn't they already spent so much effort all for the sake of finding out what the hell was happening in the Swift Dragon base?

"Hollow Ground, I'll leave this to you," said the commander decisively to one of the others. His attitude was obviously much gentler than before with the others. In the virtual world, he truly did not dare to offend this Hollow Ground.

This man was outwardly different from others. His entire figure was enveloped in shadow, while his face was a complete fog of grey, his facial features forever indistinct. This was the appearance spectres held in the virtual world. They would never reveal their true face because as spectres, everyone who was an enemy would be out to kill them. This was because almost two-thirds of one's life was spent in the virtual world in this present world, and spectres were the terrifying group of people who were the only ones to hold the ability to decide true life and death in the virtual world.

Mind you, even the mainframes of the various great empires that maintained the entire virtual world were incapable of doing this.

Therefore, all the nations both loved and hated spectres — they wished to control the spectres in their borders, while they were extremely worried and jealous about the spectres of other nations. Besides spectres, equally feared by the enemy nations were those prodigiously gifted aberrant geniuses. These people, as long as their real identity was found out, if they were opponents, they would be prioritised for assassination, just like how Ling Lan had been attacked back when she had been younger...

"Don't worry, no one can hurt them while I'm around." Hollow Ground's reply was brimming with confidence in himself. As one of the top elites in the central military spectre department, he had this confidence as well as his personal pride.

The commander frowned at those words. He knew spectres were, as a group, all strange and abnormal people. Known as death gods in the virtual world, they always had a sense of superiority as they looked down with contempt on the masses. However, since they were all Federation soldiers here, the commander did not take it to heart. He waved a hand at the men behind him, and two figures dashed out, using various areas of cover to hide themselves as they silently snuck over to an area not too far from the entrance.

At the entrance were two sentry soldiers facing outwards. Their eyes were alertly scanning everything before them — the two men who had snuck over just happened to position themselves in those sentries' blind spots, thus avoiding detection.

When they were only about ten meters away from the sentries, the two lurking men pulled out their weapons, which appeared similar to pistols, and aimed them at the two men on guard. Aware versus unaware — two muffled shots rang out as a cold light flashed at the muzzle of each pistol, and the two men on duty were hit accurately.

The two sentries had no chance to react at all, instantly falling over. It turned out that the men who had snuck over were using the highest level Federation silent tranquillizer gun. Even a relatively stronger C-class demonbeast in this universe would topple over from the anaesthetic in three seconds after being shot by this gun, not to mention these on-duty soldiers who were completely incomparable to a C-class demonbeast. As long as their skin had been scratched, they would be instantly down for the count.

Seeing that they had succeeded, the two men silently dashed over to the opponents' sides and held them up, and then swiftly gripped their heads and twisted forcefully. There was a crack, and the necks of those sentries were broken with no fuss at all. The two men then carefully laid their two victims down on the ground, and without making any noise, they turned their head to signal behind them with a wave.

The commander nodded at Hollow Ground and the other two men with him, then led the others to move stealthily over. Meanwhile, the one who had answered the commander earlier, the head of the three men, followed the commander as well.

To enter, they had to go through an electronic door. This had to be cracked by a hacker, which was why the head had followed. That person's skill level was very high; he only took a few seconds to crack the electronic door. The door opened silently — the inside was extremely dark, but these people all had night vision goggles so their eyesight was not affected much by it.

A warehouse came into sight. Inside it were stacks of military supplies. It looked like the other countless warehouses on the base, extremely normal. However, these people would not be discouraged just because of this surface appearance. They had specifically chosen this place because neither hackers nor spectres could see this area clearly, unlike other places where things could be taken in with one glance.

The commander made a hand gesture beckoning his men in and they all entered in succession. Everyone began to search the warehouse, hoping to find anything suspicious.

About five minutes later, one of their members suddenly waved to the others. It looked like he had found something. The commander immediately led the hacker with them over to the man and began to carefully examine what the other had discovered.

The hacker touched the spot, closed his eyes, and began to examine it with his senses. Very soon, he opened his eyes and nodded to the commander, confirming that this was the right spot.

The commander waved his hand and everyone took cover, hiding in a circle around the hacker. Seeing that everyone had taken cover, the hacker took three brisk steps back, took in a deep breath, and closed his eyes as his hands made various different gestures. He murmured, and then a soft click could be heard — the ground silently opened up, exposing a dark hole only capable of letting one person through at a time.

The commander looked at the hacker, and the hacker shook his head firmly, indicating that there was no perceptible movement below. Only then did the commander signal for his subordinates to scout the way.

After the first man went down the hole, the hacker's face became serious. Three minutes later, he nodded to the commander. This was to tell him that there was no problem below.

The commander motioned for everyone to go down. Once the last person went down, the ground once again returned to normal. It was as if the black hole did not exist, while the electronic door they had initially entered through closed again.

In the meantime, of the three men left at the doorway, two of them had simulated the uniforms of those officers on duty and taken up the sentries' spots at the door. It was just as if nothing major had happened here. And as the one protecting this area, Hollow Ground suddenly merged with the darkness, as if he had never been there at all.



Right then, in a secret room in the control centre of the Swift Dragon base, eight black-robed people had their eyes closed. D1 and D9 who had appeared at the start were among them, while the remaining six people appeared almost no different from them.

"These tiny ants finally could not resist taking action." D9 suddenly opened his eyes and smiled sinisterly. He cracked his fingers, rather eager to indulge in a grand fight. After waiting for two days, this group of investigators sent by the Federation mainframe had finally shown themselves.

In fact, the moment the command mainship had arrived at the Swift Dragon base, they had already been monitoring everyone from that ship and set aside a few key suspects. For this purpose, they had not hesitated to transfer several top-class spectres over from their own country. They had to be sure they could keep these people here.

They definitely could not allow the Federation to reclaim this sole foothold in the Federation which had taken them so much trouble to obtain. Moreover, their Project T was at its most critical period now — they could not afford the slightest bit of carelessness.

As long as Project T succeeded, the Chinese Federation would descend into chaos, and they would then be able to take advantage to take over the most central and resource-rich supreme nation in their galaxy. In order to achieve this objective, their empire had spent countless generations worth of sweat and blood to only complete the early stage preparations of Project T...

"Who'd have expected the other side to send so many people too. Tsk tsk tsk, three top hackers plus a top-class spectre... we've managed to bait some big fish here." D1 was looking at those people sneaking up to that basement room where they had set up a trap. Right then, those people were slowly approaching — although they were extremely cautious, they had no idea that their every move was already being captured by comprehensive surveillance.

"Keep a close eye on those other suspects." Seeing everyone becoming excited, D1 could not help but warn coldly. He did not wish for them to succeed here only to result in their most essential secret base being discovered, thus causing them to fall short of success at this final stage.

Chapter 326

The Oriole Comes From Behind!

"Rest assured. D1, D2, and D3 are stationed there. If anything happens, they will inform us," a black-robed person by D1's side calmly replied, "Moreover, two of our empire's top spectres are there looking out. Even if someone really reaches that area, the spectres can also eliminate them directly."

"We've already fished out the biggest fish, and I'm sure the others don't have the ability to get there," another black-robed man added.

"Yes, D1, don't worry too much. You had better think about how we can handle these big fish instead. Say, it's been a long time since we hunted and killed any spectres of the Chinese Federation," said another black-robed man with a dark smile.

"D10 speaks truly. D1, let's show them some of our methods. Together, we can definitely toy with those few hackers until their heads spin." A black-robed man began to cackle coldly in a corner. He was very interested in the prospect of messing with those top-class hackers of the Chinese Federation.



Meanwhile on the other side, Qi Long and the others, who had already fallen asleep, suddenly felt their communicators begin to vibrate. They leapt up and quickly put on their pre-prepared night combat clothing. Not long after, they could see the doors of their living quarters swing open automatically. Ling Lan and Li Lanfeng were standing outside the door, fully armed.

"Boss, we are ready," said Qi Long in a low voice.

"They wouldn't wake up suddenly, right?" [No Mecha Unrepaired], a.k.a. Chang Xinyuan, pointed at the three NPC soldiers sleeping soundly inside the room and asked worriedly.

"No, I've already arranged it so that no one in this room will wake up until dawn. Even

if they wake up, they will still think you all are sleeping in the room." Seeing Chang Xinyuan's concern, Ling Lan patiently explained. With the heaven-defying god of the virtual world Little Four around, Ling Lan truly wasn't at all worried that these NPCs would discover any flaws.

Ling Lan carefully scanned her team members and then said softly, "The operation this time is very dangerous and there may even be a risk to your life. It's not too late to back out now." Li Shiyu and Chang Xinyuan were members who had joined the clan partway through after all — Ling Lan did not want to force them to brave danger against their will with the rest of her team.

When she mentioned the risk to their lives, everyone was startled, but Qi Long and the others of the original team quickly regained their composure. They had been braving life and death with Ling Lan since they were small, so they were not at all afraid of this. In contrast, a trace of confusion crossed Li Shiyu's and Chang Xinyuan's eyes. They did not know what Ling Lan meant when she spoke of this risk to their lives, because in the virtual world, even if they died, they would not really die. At most, their current avatar would just have to start anew and some of their time would be wasted.

Only Li Lanfeng's countenance shifted subtly at these words. He had thought of something, and the gaze he directed at Ling Lan grew even more shadowed and firm.

Everyone was silent. Although Li Shiyu was obsessed with military medical research, as intelligent as he was, he knew that these words of Ling Lan had actually been directed at him and Chang Xinyuan. Thus, he replied firmly, "Since I have decided to join the Lingtian Battle Clan, that means I am willing to brave life and death together with the Lingtian Battle Clan, both now and in the future."

This response of Li Shiyu's had a double meaning — Ling Lan raised a brow in astonishment, pleasant surprise flashing through her eyes. The other implication of Li Shiyu's words was that, even in the real world, he would still make the same choice.

Chang Xinyuan nodded fiercely at Li Shiyu's response, indicating that he too felt the same way. Those who liked to tinker with mechanical research did not have such convoluted ways of thinking — he was not aware of the double meaning of Li Shiyu's words. He only felt that, since he had already come to do this mission, of course he would follow it through till the end. Besides, he also was not someone who would run away when the going got tough, otherwise he would not have stubbornly resisted against the Thunder King for as long as three years.

"In that case, let's move." Seeing this, Ling Lan turned decisively and was the first to step into the heavy darkness of the night.

Seeing this, the team members all silently followed suit and stepped out with determination. At this moment, they did not know that this step would bring them into a reign of carnage and bloodshed ¹ as they followed their team leader through life and death situations, all the way till the very day their lives ended.

As soon as they left the room, the door closed quietly behind them. Meanwhile, the three NPCs remained fast asleep...

Ling Lan was making her way towards the west corner of the base. In the daytime, this was where the large canteen the soldiers ate at was located. Whenever it was time for a meal, that area would become filled with human cacophony, but when night came, other than the warehouse area, it was the quietest spot in the base. No one would go there typically. No one knew that beneath the large canteen, there was actually a small secret base.

No one was on duty to patrol the canteen, but Ling Lan had been alerted by Little Four that there were at least three top-class hackers controlling countless surveillance devices, both openly and covertly, to blanket-scan ² the surrounding area. In other words, even if an ant were to crawl by, those hackers would be able to spot it clearly.

This way of doing things meant that almost no one would be able to slip by under their watch. Only if a top-class hacker came and ripped the control of the surveillance devices here from their hands would anyone be able to enter the area successfully. But that way, they would definitely be discovered instantly. This was one of the reasons why D1 believed that their control of the area was foolproof.

However, they could never imagine that there would be such a magical existence as Little Four in the world. He somehow managed to successfully manipulate things right under the noses of these three top-class hackers, making it so that false images were sent to these hackers, tricking them into believing that everything in the area was normal.

Ling Lan came to the large canteen and patiently waited for Little Four to respond. One minute later, Little Four raised a 'V' hand gesture high up into the air, butt wriggling wildly in exhilaration, and Ling Lan knew that Little Four had succeeded.

In her mindspace, Ling Lan instantly sent the smug Little Four flying with a flick of her finger. In order to prevent Little Four from making unnecessary mistakes out of pride, Ling Lan ruthlessly decided to crack down on such behaviour so that Little Four would never learn to be complacent.

Ling Lan signalled for her team members behind her to keep up as she strode up the doors of the large canteen without any sort of concealment. The rest could not help but take fright — was it really okay to just strut up like that directly?

Li Lanfeng looked at the unusually slender figure before him who walked with such sure steps and felt a complex mix of emotions stir in his heart. Compared to the others who knew very little about hacker abilities, Li Lanfeng was well aware that Ling Lan could be so bold because she had already taken control of all the surveillance devices here. Able to accomplish this in such a short amount of time, Ling Lan's hacker abilities were definitely no lower than imperial level.

He thought of the rumoured imperial level hacker involved in that Tianji Mecha Clan Headquarters explosion incident... that had most likely been Ling Lan himself. The stronger the rabbit was, the happier he should be, but there was a sense of danger in his heart that was growing thicker and thicker. It was as if the person he was chasing so desperately was getting further and further away from him.

He definitely could not let the rabbit leave him behind! Li Lanfeng secretly gritted his teeth. In the past, he had been concerned over his body's condition, so he had always restrained himself somewhat while training his mecha control skills. Despite being pressured greatly by the Thunder King, he still had not changed his ways to recklessly increase his practice load.

Li Lanfeng had always known what he should do; he would not easily change his plan. But now, he had the urgent desire to become stronger. He felt that if he continued to dither around like this, there would eventually be a day when he would not be able to keep up with the rabbit's pace. The rabbit was very likely to get further and further away from him, and in the end, he would only be able to regretfully become a passing guest in the rabbit's life.

He, Li Lanfeng, absolutely would not accept becoming such a passing guest. No matter how important a passing guest he would be, he was disdainful of the very idea. This was because he wanted to have a long-lasting friendship with the rabbit, until both their heads were grey with old age. He hoped that at that time, they would still be able

to drink wine together and reminisce, laughing together at the ups and downs they had shared up till then.

This was a deep desire that had been born from the regrets of Li Lanfeng's heartache when he had lost touch with the rabbit back when he had been 13 years old. Now, seven years later, God had given him the opportunity to re-establish this friendship, and he did not want to lose it again.

The door was soon opened, and Ling Lan led her team members straight into the canteen. The entrance to the secret base was in the canteen's kitchenette. The kitchenette only served the highest commander of the base; even the chef was a close confidante of the commander. In order to ensure the safety of the commander's food and drink, unauthorised people were not allowed to enter the kitchenette. This also worked well to protect the secrecy and security of the secret base.

Ling Lan moved towards the kitchenette like she was extremely familiar with the area. With regards to this, Qi Long and the others were already as used to it as they could be — they believed that all of this was merely due to Ling Lan's hacker abilities. Only Li Lanfeng lifted a curious brow. This was because he knew that hackers did not have the ability to locate an entrance instantaneously, nor did they have the ability to sense secrets remotely. Spectres too had some limits to their abilities — they could only use them at close range.

Li Lanfeng did not know about the existence of Little Four. As an intelligence entity, Little Four was not bound by these restrictions of hackers and spectres, which led to Little Four's status as a one of a kind existence within the virtual world. Just imagine if all the hackers and spectres had the abilities Little Four did. If that was the case, this virtual world would truly be an utter mess.

They had just entered the kitchenette when the position of the head chef's station opened up to reveal an opening. Ling Lan jumped in without delay, for Little Four had already displayed the situation below into Ling Lan's mind in 3D.

The opening and the ground below was about 20 metres apart. Ling Lan had no problems jumping this small bit of distance. With their boss as an exemplar, Qi Long and the others leapt in without any hesitation. Li Shiyu thought about it then jumped in resolutely, while Chang Xinyuan hesitated briefly before jumping in. Meanwhile, Li Lanfeng was last in line because as a spectre, he needed to constantly monitor the situation behind the group to ensure the safety of their rear end and see to it that they

were not being followed.

Although this action of Li Lanfeng was rather superfluous as Little Four already had everything in the several kilometres around them under his control. If anything stirred, Little Four would know immediately. Still, Ling Lan would not reveal this truth. For one, she needed to give Li Lanfeng a chance to perform so that he could integrate himself quicker into the team. On the other hand, there were some things that still needed to be covered up. After all, the existence of Little Four was just too bizarre — even if she were to admit it honestly, she still would not be able to properly explain the existence of Little Four. Therefore, she might as well tacitly accept this behaviour of Li Lanfeng, as well as let Qi Long and others be glad for the addition of Li Lanfeng to their team. With an additional hacker in the team, their safety would be much better guaranteed.

Without knowing it, Li Lanfeng was slowly being integrated into Ling Lan's team. Qi Long and the others were more or less beginning to realise the importance of having Li Lanfeng in the team. They no longer solely took Li Lanfeng as a temporary fighter (a temporary fighter's position was the lowest in a clan, because they were replaceable at any time) but considered him as a true member of the clan now.

Chapter 327

Spiritual Share!

After walking for about a minute, Ling Lan suddenly stopped and motioned to indicate that there was someone ahead of them. The others who had become somewhat relaxed due to the daring behaviour of Ling Lan were immediately cautious and alert.

After some thought, Ling Lan decided to expose her abilities a little. Thus, she let out her spiritual power, spreading them out into eight feelers, and began to connect them to the spiritual power of Qi Long and the others.

The spiritual power of those who had already awakened their innate talents was higher than those who had yet to awaken their innate talents, and Qi Long and the others of her original team already had some of Ling Lan's spiritual power in their minds, so her spiritual power connected with theirs very easily. Meanwhile, [No Mecha Unrepaired] and Li Shiyu had awakened support innate talents and so did not have much attack power. Hence, even though Ling Lan had to spend a little more time, she still managed to connect with their spiritual power in the end.

Only when she made contact with Li Lanfeng, her spiritual power was instantly consumed by the spectre power Li Lanfeng had placed around him earlier on as defence. Luckily, Ling Lan's spiritual power level was extremely high and she had deep reserves, so she had not been harmed much even though some of her spiritual power was consumed. That said, suddenly lacking a corner in her initially brimming spiritual power still made Ling Lan feel some discomfort. She frowned slightly, then swiftly circulated her spiritual power to instantly refill the spiritual power that had been consumed.

Ling Lan may not have been bothered much by the incident, but Li Lanfeng was instantly pale with shock and fear. He was well aware what his own power was — it was not typical hacker abilities like he had told Ling Lan but horrifying spectre power. The intrinsic nature of spectre powers was to consume and obliterate — if Ling Lan were to receive any long-lasting damage from this incident, Li Lanfeng would truly regret it for life.

Li Lanfeng's heart was filled with overwhelming regret. Perhaps he should have been

honest from the start about what his true abilities were. That way, Ling Lan would not have rashly reached out and tried to connect with his spiritual power.

"Rabbit, are you all right?" In his worry, Li Lanfeng forgot the warning from Ling Lan and called her by his usual address for her.

Rabbit? This unusual address made the ears of all the others perk up high. Qi Long and the others shared a quick knowing glance. As expected, their boss was that rabbit mecha which had caused such a sensation back in the newbie area.

In contrast, Li Shiyu and Chang Xinyuan were extremely confused. They really could not relate such a cute and harmless creature like a rabbit with Ling Lan.

"I'm fine!" Ling Lan, who had been at the head of the team, was instantly right at the back with Li Lanfeng. She pressed her index finger to Li Lanfeng's lips, her gaze sharp and cold in warning to Li Lanfeng to keep quiet. There were soldiers guarding the exit ahead and she was unsure whether they were NPCs or real people. If they were NPCs, Little Four could cover up everything that was happening here, but if they were real people, there was no way to guarantee 100% safety, so Ling Lan did not dare to be careless.

Feeling the warmth of Ling Lan's finger on his lips, Li Lanfeng seemed to be shocked stiff. He could only stare dumbly at the cold face that had suddenly appeared in front of him and remain motionless.

"Release your defence and make it easier for me to connect with your spiritual power." Ling Lan's voice rang out by Li Lanfeng's ear. The warmth of her breath caused Li Lanfeng's ears to slowly turn red, until it was actually bright crimson in the end.

After alerting Li Lanfeng, Ling Lan extended a new cord of spiritual power once more to attempt to connect with Li Lanfeng's spiritual power. Meanwhile, pre-warned now, Li Lanfeng tried his best to restrain his active spectre power, which finally allowed Ling Lan to connect successfully to his spiritual power.

Soon, the situation behind the tunnel was faithfully reflected in the minds of everyone on the team. This was the exclusive special move of the Divine Command sect — Spiritual Share! Ling Xiao's battle clan had been able to prevail for so long largely because Ling Xiao had this ability too.

After successfully connecting to Li Lanfeng's spiritual power, Ling Lan used her

spiritual power to command, "Qi Long, Luo Lang, both of you move."

Receiving their orders, Qi Long and Luo Lang immediately split from the group. Due to the Spiritual Share, they knew there were only two sentry guards beyond the tunnel and were also aware of the guards' every move. They controlled their steps to not make a sound and swiftly moved to the front of the tunnel to lay down in ambush. They would wait to attack at the most appropriate time.

Everyone's attention was on Qi Long and Luo Lang, so they did not notice Li Lanfeng at the rear silently holding his chest, as if trying to calm something.

At the moment that Ling Lan had been close to him, Li Lanfeng, who had seen Ling Lan's face at close-range, suddenly noticed that the rabbit was actually very good-looking... heaven knows whether it was out of fright or due to surprise, but Li Lanfeng's heart had actually pounded violently during that short moment, and his entire body temperature had risen by several degrees...

However, Li Lanfeng's self-control was excellent; he regained his composure after just a few seconds. Just then, Qi Long and Luo Lang, who had long saved up their strength, caught the instant the two soldiers took their eyes off the mouth of the tunnel and charged out. Like two cheetahs that had been waiting to pounce, they abruptly launched their attacks at their prey.

The two of them used their left hands to press on their opponents' chests, and with their right hand, they plunged a miniature syringe at the necks of their opponents.

The miniature syringes had been prepared by Li Shiyu, and the high-effect anaesthetic inside the syringes was also courtesy of Li Shiyu. But the conversion of a common syringe into an attack, a potentially lethal weapon at that, was indeed at the orders of Ling Lan. Ever since Li Shiyu had joined the team, Ling Lan had never even considered just letting Li Shiyu simply be a medical doctor. Instead, she made full use of Li Shiyu's medical knowledge and tasked Li Shiyu to develop all kinds of medical weapons that could increase the combat power of the team. For example, this miniature tranquillizer syringe which was simple to use and carry around.

At the moment these two soldiers were pierced in the neck, their final outcome was already decided. The anaesthetic that Li Shiyu specially developed was even stronger than those used in the tranquillizer guns of the military. Initially, Qi Long and Luo Lang had been fully prepared to cope with the opponents' desperate counterattacks — but

unexpectedly, the moment the syringes pierced the opponents, the tense muscles of the other party suddenly slackened, and their opponents were unconscious right after that.

Qi Long and Luo Lang carefully placed the two men to one side of the door, while the rest of the team, who had seen them succeed via their mind-link, walked out from the tunnel. When Qi Long saw Li Shiyu come out, a greedy expression appeared on his face. Inside their shared mindspace, he requested, "Senior Shiyu, this miniature tranquillizer syringe you've created is really too useful! Prepare a few more for us next time, okay?"

Powerfully potent, able to take the enemy down instantly, and small enough to carry around in large quantities — these syringes would also be effective as hidden weapons. Qi Long was naturally greedy for this type of useful weapon that could be used from the shadows. Sadly, the anaesthetic in the miniature syringes could only be used once. To use them again, they would need to be refilled with anaesthetic. Moreover, Li Shiyu was rather reluctant to make these things, so each member of the team only had three miniature syringes. After those three were used up, they would have to see when Li Shiyu's mood was good enough that he would be willing to help refill them... the soporific was controlled by Li Shiyu, so if he did not want to do it, no one could do anything about it.

At Qi Long's request, Li Shiyu's fair face turned dark. D*mmmit, he was a military doctor, a life-saving angel — not a devil who specialized in making these sorts of harmful weapons...

"Yes, Senior Shiyu, with your tranquillizer weapons, we won't need to kill others." Ling Lan lightly kicked the two unconscious soldiers lying on the ground. "You've allowed us to avoid staining ourselves with this sin. I really don't know how we should thank you." Ling Lan was spouting these words of gratitude, but the gaze she directed at Li Shiyu was endlessly cold. It seemed to tell Li Shiyu that it was fine even if he did not want to make more — at most, these youths in their team would just have to commit sin much earlier and stain their hands with blood.

Li Shiyu bit on his lip and looked at this bunch of innocent youths before him with hope shining from their eyes. His heart softened once more and he replied, "Understood. When I have time, I'll make more for you all. You can just come find me to refill them when you run out."

Alright, Ling Lan had completely grasped the weakness of Li Shiyu's heart. Li Shiyu truly did not have the heart to let these junior brothers who had just joined the first grade to be exposed so early to killing and sin. This would place great mental and spiritual guilt and pressure on them, which may lead them to become terrified and suffer from sleepless nights.

Li Shiyu would never forget those few cases he had seen in the Military Medical Research Centre. Those cases had all been newbies freshly back from a battlefield. Unable to shake off the guilt they felt after their first kill, they had fallen into severe depression and some even displayed suicidal tendencies...

If only Li Shiyu had known that these first-year youths that were so pure and innocent in his eyes had already participated in a civilian expedition team and been exposed to killing long before joining the academy, he would certainly regret his decision. These youths had already been stained with blood, and their hearts had already become exceedingly strong and ruthless from their experience. It should be said that Li Shiyu was like a pure and kind-hearted rabbit. For the sakes of what appeared to be a group of rabbits in his eyes but who were actually wolves in rabbits' skins, he was altering his baseline again and again, repeatedly subverting his original three outlooks. Unconsciously, he was going down the path of evolving into a black rabbit...

Li Lanfeng saw that Li Shiyu had once again chosen to concede, and he knew that this cute and pure younger cousin of his was almost gone. He had mixed feelings about this realisation, unsure what he should say. In the end, he could only sigh...

Li Shiyu's reply made Qi Long and the others yell out in excitement within their mindscape. Li Shiyu, who had initially felt a bit down for compromising his principles, found his gloomy mood lifting at the sight of his happy juniors.

With her back to them, Ling Lan, who seemed to be studying the door before them, found the corners of her lips quirking up subtly. How is this Dux Li so easy to deceive? As someone from the same Li family, the leopard was obviously much more black-bellied...

Little Four did not open the door, merely transmitting the situation behind the door faithfully into Ling Lan's mind. Of course, Ling Lan shared this information as soon as she could with the rest of her teammates, and the initially excited group instantly became sombre again, knowing that this would be a difficult hurdle. Because behind the door were another two soldiers staring intently at the door from about 10 metres

away. The moment they opened the door, they would be discovered. And the distance of 10 metres was enough for the soldiers to react and sound the alarm before the quickest attack of the team could reach them.

"Boss, what should we do?" Everyone looked towards Ling Lan and waited for her instructions.

If this were the real world, Ling Lan could have used a spiritual attack to knock down the opponents. But here in the virtual world, this killer move of hers is restricted. Just as Ling Lan was pondering how she could handle this perfectly, Li Lanfeng proposed, "Boss Lan and I are both hackers so we can apply some disguises." He pointed to the two soldiers who were lying unconscious and continued to say, "Two people from the team can pretend to be the guard soldiers standing at the door, while Boss Lan and I impersonate people from the base and go in. I think they will not doubt us right away, and as long as we can get close to them, Boss Lan and I will have the opportunity to take them out before they sound the alarm."

Chapter 328

Spectre!

Li Lanfeng's suggestion put a shine in the eyes of everyone on the team. Han Jijyun cast a searching look at Li Lanfeng, once again feeling that invisible pressure the other gave him.

Ling Lan immediately gave her stamp of approval to Li Lanfeng's method. Qi Long and Xie Yi were the two brawniest people on the team and thus had the most soldier-like builds. The two of them quickly changed into the uniforms of the two soldiers and separated to stand on both sides of the gate. Other than Ling Lan and Li Lanfeng, the others all ducked into the tunnel again to hide with the two comatose soldiers.

Under everyone's gaze, Ling Lan and Li Lanfeng's initially black combat uniforms slowly changed to look like the uniform of the soldiers on the base, exactly like the uniforms Qi Long and Xie Yi had put on. The only difference was their epaulettes — Ling Lan's choice was a major's epaulette, while Li Lanfeng wisely chose to be a senior captain. He stood respectfully half a step behind Ling Lan.

This move made Ling Lan's team's impression of Li Lanfeng rise once more. It should be said that Li Lanfeng was consistently building on his favourability rating among Ling Lan's team members, and he was achieving his goal handily.

When everything was ready, Ling Lan instructed Little Four to open the door. After the doors opened, Ling Lan proudly strutted through the doorway, while Li Lanfeng followed behind her solemnly and respectfully.

Meanwhile, Qi Long and Xie Yi were standing straight on both sides of the door with their backs to it. They both executed an exemplary military salute at the same time, only putting their hands down again after Ling Lan and Li Lanfeng had passed by. All of it looked exceedingly normal.

The two soldiers on the other side of the door were taken aback by the sudden opening of the door and the two officers who had randomly walked through. They shared a doubtful glance because they had not received any news from above that someone would enter the secret base at this time.

However, the salutes and respectful behaviour of the two sentry guards at the door made these two soldiers afraid to judge rashly. Perhaps there had been some emergency so those above had not had time to inform them. Still, carrying out their duty as guards, one of the men yelled out, "Password!"

Li Lanfeng had already walked through the doors with Ling Lan at this time. When he heard the soldiers ask for a password, his heart skipped a beat and his steps slowed involuntarily. Only Ling Lan's pace remained steady. As if not at all affected by the other side asking for a password, she continued to walk forwards confidently, even raising her head to look at the two men before her with an extremely cold gaze.

"Hn, well done," Ling Lan finally spoke up, praising the two soldiers lightly. This made the two men frown, and as Ling Lan took one more step forward, the faces of the two men were about to change drastically when she continued to say, "The password..."

Hearing the mention of the password, the tense expressions of the two men eased for a moment, and it was at this precise moment that Ling Lan pounced forwards like a cheetah with her entire body, instantly coming right up to the two men.

She opened her hands wide and flicked them forcefully. Two gleams of cold light flashed through the air, and then with a shake and a clench of both her arms, two almost invisible thin ropes flew out from her wrists to instantly loop around the hands of the two soldiers. With a forceful tug, the men were dragged away from their initial position.

Ling Lan's attack had seemed complicated, but it had been completed in an instant. The attack had come too suddenly — those two men did not have any time to react and were pulled right into the air. Ling Lan's hands pulled downwards, and the two men who had been about to collide with one another in the air abruptly changed directions to fall towards the ground. With a quick dash, Ling Lan was below them, and she caught the two men securely.

By this time, the two men were already long unconscious. Ling Lan quietly set them down on the floor.

Only then did Li Lanfeng reach Ling Lan's side. Seeing how much Ling Lan's speed and mobility surpassed his, Li Lanfeng felt a deep sense of frustration. Whether it be in terms of mecha controls or physical skills, he was considerably worse than the rabbit. It looked like, for him to achieve his dream of fighting by the rabbit's side, he would

need to work much harder.

"Just now you had obviously already hit them with the tranquillizer needles. Why did you still pull them out of their positions?" Even though Li Lanfeng's speed was no match for Ling Lan's, his vision was excellent. He had managed to see all of Ling Lan's moves in their entirety during that instant.

Ling Lan did not reply, only motioning for Li Lanfeng to go check out the area where the two men had been standing. Li Lanfeng walked over suspiciously, but when he bent down to take a closer look, his expression changed. It turned out that the alarm activation device was right where the two men had been standing.

Though the two men had seemed to be standing firmly at their posts, in fact, they had each only been standing with one foot flat on the ground. The ankle of their other foot was in the air. In other words, their weight was only on the first half of their foot, while their ankle was held off the ground. The moment they noticed anything odd, they need only step down fully and their ankle would trigger the alarm instantly.

This kind of setup was extremely covert and not easily discovered. It could even guarantee that even if the sentry guards did not react in time and were killed, without the conscious thought to keep their ankles up, the guards' feet would certainly step down as their bodies lost balance. The alarm would still be successfully triggered.

Seeing Li Lanfeng return with a face full of belated fear, Ling Lan silently swiped the cold sweat from her forehead. Frankly, she too had not known the alarm was set up in such a way beforehand. If Little Four had not discovered it and alerted her in time right before she attacked, Ling Lan would definitely have fallen for the trap. Even if she managed to kill these two people, they still would not have been able to avoid triggering the alarm. In the end, they would have been forced to run away and return empty-handed.

Seeing that Ling Lan had successfully defeated the two guards inside, Qi Long and the others hurried over. When they saw how the alarm here was set up to be triggered, they too were struck with sympathetic fear, exclaiming that this setup was truly too insane. On the other hand, Chang Xinyuan was extremely interested in the setup. He laid right down on the ground to examine it closely, muttering to himself, as if calculating something.

They did not linger for long. Despite Chang Xinyuan's reluctant gaze, Ling Lan led her

team to continue moving deeper into the base. This particular hurdle had indeed been rather challenging, but after that, things became much easier. Perhaps the senior officer of the secret base placed a lot of trust in this alarm setup of theirs, for the following few checkpoints were not as crazy and complicated. Ling Lan's team smoothly made their way to the centre of the base.

Ling Lan led her team members to this area and then stopped moving, because if they moved any further, they would enter the range of the spectres' monitoring. Little Four had long reported to Ling Lan that there were two spectres overseeing the area. The moment they entered within the spectres' range of detection, they would be ruthlessly attacked and obliterated. Moreover, at this time, Ling Lan had no idea how she could explain to her team members how she had known there were spectres here.

Only spectres could sense another spectre — as for who sensed who first, that would depend on whose spectre abilities were stronger. Furthermore, hacker abilities and spectre abilities were two diametrically opposite abilities ¹, which made it almost impossible for both to awaken in the same person at the same time. Even if there was an accident and someone managed to awaken these two abilities that could not coexist, they would still be unable to make those two kinds of abilities strong together.

Because the more powerful the abilities grew, the greater the friction between the two powers would become. The Federation had conducted an experiment once where they had made someone who had awakened both these talents to train them both up equally. In the end, the final outcome was that the bearer of the abilities was unable to withstand the build-up of friction between the two powers. His brain had been crushed under the explosive force caused by the clashing of the two powers, and he was reduced to a vegetable, never waking up ever again.

From then on, the Federation set the restriction so that even if someone awakened both these abilities, they could only choose just one to develop ². This information had been carefully conveyed to the students by the instructors of the scout academy around the time their innate talents began to awaken. As such, Qi Long and the others would be well aware of this fact, so she had no way of explaining why she could possess such powerful hacker abilities and spectre abilities at the same time. It could only be said that Little Four's existence was just too formidable beyond comprehension. Ling Lan could not find a reasonable explanation even if she wanted to.

Right then at that moment, Li Lanfeng, who had been rather subdued due to his shock

at the extent of Ling Lan's skills, suddenly became focused and his expression turned rather grim. As if sensing something, he immediately cut off his spiritual connection to Ling Lan. Under everyone's stunned gaze and Ling Lan's quiet realisation, an extremely dangerous aura silently seeped out from his body and began to slowly spread.

Everyone felt this aura that made them uncomfortable and sensed their own spiritual power beginning to shudder violently. At the point where they felt as if their spiritual power were about to be consumed by this aura, Ling Lan's spiritual power abruptly surged up and spread out to swiftly wrap around the spiritual power of the seven others in the team.

Ling Lan's protection greatly stabilised the spiritual power of the seven people. Everyone was still unsettled by the experience; only Han Jijun stared grimly at Li Lanfeng, as if thinking of something.

At this moment, Li Lanfeng had no mind to consider the situation of his companions. He had sensed two dangerous presences ahead, similar to his spectre powers, though they seemed slightly weaker than him since they had yet to notice his presence.

Still, Li Lanfeng's brow remained locked tight. The other side had two people, so Li Lanfeng could not be certain whether he could go up against both of them and keep everyone in the team safe. Afraid that the other side would discover his presence, he swiftly tamped down on his spectre power. With a grave expression, he turned to look at Ling Lan and said softly, "Rabbit, there are two spectres inside. They are very strong. The moment we enter their surveillance range, we will be attacked. Our lives are likely to be threatened."

Against just one, Li Lanfeng had the confidence to defeat the other with just a bit of luck. But with two, Li Lanfeng could not be too sure. After all, the spectres inside were just slightly weaker than him. If the two of them had good rapport and worked together, even if he wanted to protect everyone in Ling Lan's team, he was afraid he would miss something and expose a weakness to be caught by the enemy.

Initially, Li Lanfeng had suspected that Ling Lan too possessed very strong spectre abilities. However, as Ling Lan's hacker abilities had been showcased more and more, Li Lanfeng no longer had much hope for Ling Lan's spectre power. The things that Ling Lan and the others knew, Li Lanfeng knew as well. Although hacker power and spectre power could exist simultaneously, they could not grow strong together.

Perhaps Ling Lan had possessed both these abilities at the start, but he must have chosen to develop his hacker abilities rather than his spectre abilities. Li Lanfeng felt that this was a bit of a shame because almost all spectres were under the control of the Federation military. As the first heir of the Li family, Li Lanfeng naturally could not become a puppet of the military. Thus, when his grandfather had noticed how unique Li Lanfeng's spiritual power was, suspecting that he might be one of those rumoured spectres, his grandfather had completely sealed away all news of this. This was why Li Lanfeng had not been discovered by the military.

Chapter 329

Volunteering to Fight!

All these years, Li Lanfeng had not met any other of his kind in the virtual world. This had made him feel rather lonely, and this was also why he had taken an interest in Ling Lan even before he found out Ling Lan was the rabbit. Thinking that the other might have spectre abilities, he had been curious and wanted to find out more about him.

"You are not a hacker but a spectre, right?" Just as the other companions were astounded by what Li Lanfeng had said, Han Jijyun suddenly asked softly.

Han Jijyun's words surprised the rest of the team. They all knew what spectres represented in the virtual world. No wonder they had felt as if a great catastrophe was upon them just now. The dangerous aura they had sensed at that time was most likely spectre power.

Li Lanfeng nodded and said apologetically, "Yes, I'm a spectre. In order to hide my powers, I lied to you all. I'm sorry!"

"I knew this already. You all also know there are hardly any spectres in the civilian world. For the leopard's personal safety, I did not allow the leopard to speak of this," said Ling Lan suddenly, "I hope that this matter ends here. If anyone else finds out the leopard is a spectre, his life will be in danger."

Ling Lan's words caused everyone's heart to clench. Indeed, spectres had always been the primary targets of assassination by the enemy nations of the Federation. As long as a spectre's real identity was exposed, their enemies would kill the spectre at any cost. This was also why the Federation military had brought all the spectres in their borders under their control. The Federation needed to protect these spectres, though of course part of the reason was also that they were afraid the spectres not under their control would cause some horrific massacre in the virtual world.

In the virtual world, spectres were synonymous with death gods. With the exception of other spectres, no one else could stand up against spectres. Even the most powerful warrior in the real world or the most authoritative leaders and high-ranking officials were like powerless and defenceless babies before a spectre in the virtual world,

helpless if the other intended to kill them.

Thus, the authorities in every nation both loved and feared spectres. They loved spectres because they could become weapons to threaten the enemy nations with, but they were also afraid the spectres would turn on them and harm them. This had also brought about the tragedy of spectres never ever having any freedom in their lives. No authority would be willing to let these frightening beings that could endanger their lives in the virtual world run around unchecked. For their own safety, they inevitably chose to control, or even ruthlessly obliterate these spectres!

"Yes, Boss!" Everyone on the team understood what Ling Lan was saying. Besides, Li Lanfeng had chosen to come clean, which was practically placing his life in their hands — this was the trust he had in his teammates. Qi Long and the others were extremely moved by this. It was from this point on that Qi Long and the others truly took Li Lanfeng as their own companion. He was no longer just a friend of the boss who had joined them halfway, as a member whose status was yet to be determined as temporary or permanent.

Han Jijyun threw a complex glance at Li Lanfeng. He mentally applauded Li Lanfeng's decisiveness in using all he could to obtain the acknowledgement of his companions, allowing him to integrate into the team at a very fast speed. At this time, he had a hunch that Li Lanfeng might be the strongest rival for his position in the team...

Han Jijyun silently clenched his fists and told himself that he needed to work hard. He absolutely could not lose to Li Lanfeng, this member who had only joined them along the way. He, Han Jijyun, would not give up on the role of military strategist!

Hearing Ling Lan speak up in his defence, Li Lanfeng was extremely grateful. He knew very well that he had never told Ling Lan he was a spectre.

This should be what the books call a 'bosom friend' — at critical moments, the other would help him, accept him, and defend him. Li Lanfeng's heart pumped violently once again, a sort of indescribable warmth rippling within it.

Just as everyone was deciding whether or not to continue with the mission, Ling Lan asked Li Lanfeng with a serious expression, "Leopard, can you withstand the attacks of two spectres?" Only spectres could fight against another spectre's abilities — despite having the virtual god Little Four and so being not at all afraid of the spectres, Ling Lan still needed to ask Li Lanfeng this question. After all, on the surface, Li

Lanfeng would be the one fending off the spectres.

Li Lanfeng considered the issue seriously and then replied, "In terms of pure defence, there should be no problem. It's just that there are quite a few members in the team. Once we spread out, I'm afraid I might slip up and the opponent might jump on that chance." The connotation was that resisting was not a problem, but their numbers were a little too many since his defence area was not very wide. Once anyone went out of this range of his, he would not be able to guarantee the safety of all the members of the team.

This was the statement Ling Lan was waiting for. She decided to let Qi Long and the others wait here while she and Li Lanfeng went ahead to check things out.

This decision received firm opposition from the rest of the team; they insisted that they wanted to follow Ling Lan in. They also promised that they would listen to orders and stick closely to Li Lanfeng without veering even one step away.

Li Lanfeng saw that none of the team members wanted to retreat and was instantly filled with pride. He spoke up to say, "Rabbit, I will do my best to protect them. Just let them come."

Ling Lan figured there should not be any big problems since there was still Little Four as backup, so she nodded and agreed.

Ling Lan led the way to the largest door. In fact, they all knew that they had been heading downwards all this while — who knows how deep they had travelled. But upon seeing this large door, every member of their group believed they were already at least 200 to 300 metres deep underground.

Ling Lan then used Spiritual Share to display the situation behind the door to all the team members. It was no longer just a few soldiers protecting this door but a medium-sized team of about 15 people.

On both sides of the door were two iron walls, each with three beam machine guns jutting out from shooting ports aimed at the doorway. And at the end of the iron walls, about 30 metres from the main door, six armed soldiers were each holding a heavy firearm and staring vigilantly at the door. There were also three more people hiding in blind corners of the iron walls. They really did not need to worry about those three men though — as long as they did not reveal themselves, they would not be able to

attack the group anyway.

Moreover, Ling Lan and the others were not afraid that they would activate some alarm device either, because once they entered, the spectres would notice them anyway. Thus, they would be exposed regardless of whether the alarm was sounded.

That aside, other than the spectres, they now also had to make preparations to handle an unforeseen enemy — mecha warriors. From the image transmitted via Ling Lan's Spiritual Share, they could see that the area behind the door was vast. There was a space of about 50 metres from ground to ceiling. This proved that not only would ground infantry be present; there might also be mecha operators.

The group set aside those potential enemies for now as they began to analyse how they should deal with the current situation. The six beam machine guns were definitely for Boss Lan to deal with — only Ling Lan had the skill to shoot a hidden weapon accurately into the shooting ports to finish off the six shooters inside.

Meanwhile, Li Lanfeng had to deal with the two spectres. Once they entered, he would have to put all his strength into that, so he would not be able to spare a hand to help with the physical fighting. Therefore, the others would have to deal with the six soldiers with heavy firearms at the front on their own.

Qi Long and the other four of the original group were naturally alright with this. Having grown up under Ling Lan's tough love, even the weakest Han Jiyun was not weaker than the others by much. The key was what they would do for the sixth soldier. After all, each of them could only handle one person — that final additional person would be left out, giving him a chance to fire at them.

Qi Long gave it some serious thought and felt there was still a pretty good chance of success. He was just about to say that he would also handle that last person when Li Shiyu, who had been quietly observing from the side, suddenly volunteered, "That sixth person, leave him to me."

This was the first time Li Shiyu had taken the initiative to do something. This surprised everyone, causing them to all turn to look in Li Shiyu's direction. The intent gazes of the team members disconcerted Li Shiyu, whose fair face was instantly painted with a flush.

"Senior Shiyu is from the military medical research specialization. Won't your combat

ability be a little weak? If there's an injury or an accident, the loss to the team will be significant. I don't think it's a good idea." Xie Yi was the first to object. If they were injured, they still had Li Shiyu to help patch them up, but if Li Shiyu was injured, they would be helpless to do anything about it if it were serious.

Xie Yi's words made everyone nod silently in agreement, believing that letting Li Shiyu handle the final sixth soldier was not very appropriate. Chang Xinyuan's mouth twitched, about to volunteer himself when Li Shiyu retorted coldly, "Although I'm a military doctor, my combat skills are not at all weak."

Li Shiyu's typically calm eyes were currently blazing with the flames of anger — Xie Yi's words had made him feel insulted. His expression was proud and confident as he retorted. This expression was very familiar — when Li Yingjie was displaying his proud and haughty side, this was the expression he wore. This caused Qi Long and the others to turn their heads away, unable to look straight at Li Shiyu. As expected of a member of the Li family — that pride and arrogance were in their very bones.

"Ahem ahem, actually, Young Master Shiyu's combat ability is very good. Our Li family puts great focus on cultivating its inheritors' combat skills from young. Based on what I know, Young Master Shiyu's combat ability is significantly stronger than Young Master Yingjie's," Li Lanfeng suddenly interrupted to say with a smile. Though his expression seemed endlessly sincere, as if trying to explain on the behalf of Li Shiyu, for some reason Ling Lan felt a dissonance in his bearing and could not help but feel goosebumps rising all over her body.

"Since we're all from the same team, just call me Shiyu in future," said Li Shiyu earnestly to Li Lanfeng, casting a grateful glance at the other. Li Shiyu frankly loathed the address of 'young master'. However, previously in the military academy, he could not reject the title directly because this was after all tied to the pride and status of his identity as a direct descendant of the Li family. But now, since they had become battle clan comrades, Li Shiyu felt that this address was no longer necessary nor appropriate.

Li Lanfeng smiled widely in response and said with a nod, "Alright then, Shiyu."

When he said this, Ling Lan keenly picked up on Li Lanfeng's buoyant mood.

Seeing Li Shiyu's eagerness to fight and with Li Lanfeng speaking up in support, Qi Long and the others could not find a good way to refuse. So they all turned to look towards Ling Lan, waiting for their boss to give the final word.

Ling Lan nodded and said, "Since Senior Shiyu is sure, then it's decided." Her expression turned stern and she added, "Qi Long, Luo Lang, Xie Yi, Han Jijyun, Lin Zhong-qing, Li Shiyu. The six people at the front are up to you all. You must complete your duty."

"Yes, Boss!" "Yes, Leader!" Even though they all responded slightly differently, the timing of their responses was synchronous. Li Shiyu was currently still unable to call Ling Lan 'Boss' like Qi Long and the others.

Chapter 330

The Lingtian Battle Clan in the Eyes of Chang Xinyuan!

Right then, Chang Xinyuan, who had been standing to one side without finding an opportunity to interrupt, suddenly said, "Wait a minute, I have some things to give you all."

Chang Xinyuan then took out six round metal discs which looked like palm-sized hand mirrors from his bag. He tossed them to Qi Long and the other five and explained, "These are miniature beam shields I created. The power they contain is only able to withstand one heavy artillery attack. Bring them along with you. Although they aren't that good, they should still be able to play a protective role at critical moments."

Chang Xinyuan then explained how to use the miniature beam shields. The appearance of this unexpected piece of equipment delighted everyone; any extra bit of protection was naturally good. They had already come so far in this mission — the hope of success was in sight; no one wanted to just die and be respawned back at the start.

Qi Long thumped Chang Xinyuan's shoulder enthusiastically, loudly praising how awesome Chang Xinyuan's little invention was as he did so. The strength behind the thumps almost threw Chang Xinyuan to the ground. Qi Long then requested for Chang Xinyuan to make more of these useful and easily portable small beam shields whenever he had the time. It would be best if each of them could have ten or more of these.

With regards to this rather outrageous request of Qi Long's, Chang Xinyuan was not at all angry. Instead, he was very happy, breaking out into a large grin. For Qi Long to say this meant that he, Chang Xinyuan, was useful to the team — the members of the team needed him. This was a great comfort to him.

Along the way, Chang Xinyuan had realised that every member of Ling Lan's team was very strong. Whether it was in terms of mecha operation or physical skills, they were much stronger than the average battle clan, so much stronger than him. This made

Chang Xinyuan feel rather inferior and he had even begun to wonder whether he could remain in the clan and actually become a true member.

The brotherly bond among the members of Ling Lan's team made Chang Xinyuan, who had always been alone, endlessly envious. It could be said that Chang Xinyuan had joined Ling Lan's team at the start out of a lack of options — he had no other choice. If he had passed off the chance to join Ling Lan's team, he might very likely have had no other opportunity to ever join a battle clan after that. The cruel truth of the situation pushed him to take the gamble. When Ling Lan had received that SSS-rank mission, he had indeed hesitated. However, Chang Xinyuan was not a person who would give up at the first sign of difficulty, otherwise he would not have resisted the Thunder King's oppression for three years. In the end, he chose to fight along with Ling Lan and the others.

Over this duration of time doing the mission together, he had come to understand the deep bond among the team members. Boss Lan was very cold and somewhat domineering (this was just Chang Xinyuan's perception. Ling Lan was actually not domineering at all, she was just used to keeping a slackface), so it was rather stressful trying to get along with him. At times, just making eye contact with Boss Lan would cause him to have difficulty breathing. He knew that the truly strong would always have a type of aura about them. However, he had never encountered someone like Boss Lan who gave him such heavy pressure. If the Thunder King had exuded the same type of feeling as Boss Lan back then, he probably would not have been able to hold out and would have long chosen to capitulate.

But this domineering, cold, and ruthless Boss Lan would forever stand right at the front of the team and shield them from the wind and rain at the most critical moments. Just like when the magnetic tsunami had hit, Boss Lan had decisively stayed right till the end to ensure all of them safely entered the mainship first. That time, Boss Lan had almost died in the magnetic tsunami.

Chang Xinyuan was well aware that Boss Lan was not just acting. He was very strict with Qi Long and the others' training, perhaps even somewhat brutal about it — he was absolutely a harsh taskmaster. Many times, Chang Xinyuan himself felt that Qi Long and the others were not going to survive. But then, he also saw more than once how Boss Lan would seek out Li Shiyu whenever he had the time to discuss how they could improve the physical constitutions of the team members, along with their endurance and resistance to blows. And all of this was so they continue to stay alive and well, whether it was in Mecha World or in the real world when they fought on a

real battlefield in the future.

Boss Lan was a responsible boss and an even more competent parental battle clan leader. Following such a boss, he would never have to worry about being pushed out someday to be a sacrificial scapegoat. Alright, the bits and pieces which had happened over this period of time had caused him to become like Qi Long and the others, beginning to idolise Boss Lan...

Meanwhile, Qi Long and Luo Lang were the primary and secondary fighters of the team, the strongest in the team in both mecha combat and physical skills combat, but of course they were incomparable to Boss Lan. Back when the New Cadet Regiment had fought against Leiting in the arena, they had been two of the five representatives. Among them, Luo Lang defeated the third strongest in Leiting, while Qi Long fought on even terms with the second strongest of Leiting, only losing unfortunately in the end. All this information had been conveyed to him by Li Shiyu. He had put his entire mind into modifying mecha back then so he was not very clear on the various things that had happened in the military academy, including that arena battle.

Xie Yi was very warm and passionate. He was the first among the old members of the team to take the initiative to get to know Chang Xinyuan better. Friendly and cheerful, they got along very well. But Xie Yi's combat ability was not weaker than Luo Lang's by much. Typically, in battle clans, the main and secondary fighters would be stronger while the rest of the fighters would be a bracket lower. However, in Ling Lan's battle clan, almost everybody's strength levels were very close. With Xie Yi's strength, even if he might not be able to be the primary fighter in another battle clan, he more than qualified to be a secondary fighter. But in Ling Lan's clan, due to the fierce competition with rivals as plentiful as clouds, Xie Yi could only be one of the two wings of the team.

Han Jijyun normally looked very austere, as if hard to get along with, and his eyes always shone with a calculative light. Chang Xinyuan had always felt rather nervous around these kinds of strategist-type people, afraid to approach them. But whenever Boss Lan was absent or sitting idly by, Han Jijyun would automatically take responsibility for the command of the team, develop tactics, and make arrangements to keep the team operations running smoothly.

During the time they had lost contact with Boss Lan, Han Jijyun had proved that he was well qualified for the role. Back when they had no way of obtaining certain news regarding Boss Lan, he was the one who daringly decided to use the set of false data they had agreed on at the start. Despite part of it being due to Chang Xinyuan's

suggestion, after learning more about hacker abilities later, Chang Xinyuan had greatly admired Han Jijyun's boldness and decisiveness, as well as the other's deep and unwavering faith in Boss Lan...

Meanwhile, Lin Zhong-qing was usually very plain and unobtrusive, perhaps even a little like an invisible person, always silently doing his things. At first, Chang Xinyuan had somewhat overlooked him. But then, the team went on the move. Every time Boss Lan wanted an update on the materials remaining for the team, he would definitely ask Lin Zhong-qing. This let Chang Xinyuan know that Lin Zhong-qing was the head logistician of the team.

The facts proved that Lin Zhong-qing carried out his role as logistician perfectly. Whenever the team needed something, he would be like the legendary Doraemon, bringing out resource after resource to meet the needs of everyone on the team. It was clear to see that he had a very thorough understanding of each and every member of the team, knowing what they might need. In particular, what surprised Chang Xinyuan was that although he, Li Shiyu, and Li Lanfeng had just joined the team, Lin Zhong-qing had been able to figure out some of their habits within this short amount of time. From there, he had actually been able to also prepare some of the materials they needed...

Li Shiyu had joined the team with him, but the other was already familiar with Qi Long and the others. At first, when Chang Xinyuan had not known their true identities, he could still tell they already knew each other in real life just by their interactions. Li Shiyu was somewhat aloof — this may just be the characteristic of a dux. Chang Xinyuan did not think there was anything wrong with it; it was normal for those with talent to be a little prideful. Perhaps because he too was a researcher like himself, Li Shiyu was also very straightforward and innocent, maybe even a little soft in Chang Xinyuan's eyes. That was why he was always unknowingly falling for Boss Lan's verbal manipulations, having to follow whatever Boss Lan said in the end.

Perhaps finding Li Shiyu a little pitiful, Chang Xinyuan often chatted with the other. Perhaps because they were both newcomers to the team, or perhaps because they were both researchers, and maybe also because the other could sense his benign intentions, the two of them got along very well, always having something to talk about. This was also how he had found out more about Qi Long and the others. During their conversations, they would often talk about their teammates as well as their exploits and achievements.

The one Chang Xinyuan could not puzzle out was Li Lanfeng. The other had a great attitude, often seen with a warm and gentle smile. He was always extremely respectful towards everyone in the team and seemed easy-going. However, Chang Xinyuan just did not dare to get too close to him. For some reason, the other felt unsafe, without the sense of stable security Li Shiyu gave him. This might be because Li Lanfeng was a spectre, having an innate dangerous air about him. Chang Xinyuan could only use this reason to reassure himself.

In short, Chang Xinyuan had been very happy during this period of time spent with the team. Having been oppressed by the Thunder King for three years, constantly lonely and depressed, Chang Xinyuan treasured the happiness he felt in this brief period of time. He could not bear to lose this again — he really wanted to join the team and become a permanent member, not just a passing guest. Thus, Chang Xinyuan had spent these past few days in a daze, afraid that his hopes would be nothing but a mirage ¹.

This was also why Qi Long's outrageous request had made him so happy — it had made him feel just a bit more integrated into the team. In his joy, Chang Xinyuan's thoughts shifted to the six shooters Boss Lan was going to handle. The best hidden weapon for the task would undoubtedly be the miniature tranquillizer shots Li Shiyu had made. Chang Xinyuan remembered very well that Boss Lan had already used up two as they had passed through the tunnel earlier. Right now, he must only have one left on him.

At this thought, Chang Xinyuan quickly brought out the three tranquillizer shots given to him from his bag, passing them over to Ling Lan as he said, "Boss Lan, I remember that you only have one left. To take out those six men, you'll need another five. I won't be using these 3 of mine. Why don't you take them, Boss?"

Chang Xinyuan's words alerted everyone and they all quickly began rifling through their bags to see if they had any more, all of them wanting to give theirs up for their boss to use.

Ling Lan speechlessly accepted the three tranquillizer shots Chang Xinyuan had handed over. She could not tell them that, as long as she had the materials, Little Four could instantly create countless tranquillizer shots for her...

Li Lanfeng had just taken out his own set of tranquillizer syringes and was about to hand them over when Li Shiyu beat him to it.

"Here, leader, I won't be using these things. Take it." Li Shiyu decisively passed his three miniature tranquillizer syringes to Ling Lan.

Ling Lan only took two of the three in his hands and said lightly, "In a bit, you'll need to use it."

Ling Lan's words gave Li Shiyu pause, but then Qi Long came up to circle an arm over Li Shiyu's neck and said with a smile, "For those six people we have to deal with, if we want to take them down instantly, we can't lack this creation of yours, you know."

Qi Long's reminder enlightened Li Shiyu. He no longer pressed the matter, taking back that last syringe in his hand. He clamped it tightly between two fingers, prepared to use it when they attacked.

Chapter 331

The Existence of a BUG

Seeing how well the members, both old and new, were getting along, Ling Lan's lips quirked up slightly. Then, her expression turned stony as she ordered, "Get ready to move."

Everyone immediately stood up, their initially relaxed and smiling faces turning serious and focused in an instant. The initially relaxed atmosphere was swept away immediately.

Li Lanfeng once again looked admiringly at Ling Lan. He had joined many battle clans before temporarily, but Ling Lan's battle clan was the most efficient. When it was time to relax, they relaxed, but the members would never drag the rest of the team down at critical moments — the transition between moods was perfect. Like now, the moment Ling Lan gave a command, no matter how relaxed they had been before, the members could instantly enter battle mode. This was completely the type of mentality and experience only veteran soldiers could have, yet this bunch of youths three years younger than him had actually managed to attain them. This made Li Lanfeng once again feel the threat — if he did not work hard to become stronger, he would be left behind by these people if he wasn't careful.

Even as Li Lanfeng felt the pressure, he was grateful. Luckily he had found the rabbit early and was able to join his battle clan. He believed that as long as they strive to become strong and continue to grow, the Lingtian Battle Clan would definitely become one of the strongest battle clans in the Federation. He had faith in Ling Lan, he had faith in himself, and he had faith in these youths.

Even if he really did meet that so-called king in the future... he just did not believe that with the help of the rabbit and these youths, he would still be subject to such humiliation... Li Lanfeng clenched his fists tight. He would definitely go against the heavens and change his fate!

Once everything was ready, Ling Lan led her team members to split up and hide themselves on both sides of the large door, and then she instructed Little Four to open the door.

The door swung open abruptly, stunning the people inside. Ling Lan's team hiding in the wings charged out like ferocious tigers under Ling Lan's battle cry, each leaping towards their respective targets.

Ling Lan took the lead, three miniature syringes in each hand, leaping out in two large steps. With a stomp of her right foot, her entire body flew into the air. In mid-air, she swung both her hands vigorously, and the six miniature tranquilizer syringes flew out like rays of light, shooting right at those six shooting ports.

Ling Lan was very confident that she would not miss, because she had already used the guidance ability of her spiritual power to align the six miniature tranquilizer syringes to follow the route she wanted so that the syringes would unerringly strike the shooters hiding within the iron wall.

Six cries of pain rang out and then the sounds abruptly cut off. Why had there been a reactionary sound this time when using the syringes? It was because the openings of the ports were truly too small — in order to ensure she hit the opponents, Ling Lan had chosen their most fragile parts to target: their eyes. Who asked the shooters to have their eyes wide open, staring through their gun scopes? According to the flight path, the eyes were the easiest spot to target and hit.

Six miniature syringes struck and shattered the gun scopes, and then ruthlessly pierced the eyes of those shooters. Eyes were the most sensitive among the human organs, with the most rapid reflex nerves. That was why the shooters had time to cry out before the anaesthetic could take effect. Still, it was only for that brief moment — Li Shiyu's intensified anaesthetic was truly too overbearing. Additionally, the eyes were the closest to the brain — the opponents were almost instantly put down, which was why the screams had been abruptly throttled.

At the same time, Qi Long and the other five following behind Ling Lan overtook her when she leapt up into the air to throw the syringes, instantly sprinting forwards about 30 metres, where they then fiercely leapt at those six soldiers armed with heavy firearms.

"Enemy attack!" Seeing six people charging at them, even the dumbest soldier knew that these people must be enemies and not friends. One of the men quickly raised his voice to shout, simultaneously raising the heavy firearm in his hands to aim it at the six incoming people, preparing to shoot. Although heavy firearms were powerful and fiercely overbearing, it was not so convenient to use them. Using them were by far not

as agile as using beam guns, which was why Qi Long and the others had dared to charge in so directly. They were banking on striking with haste before the enemies could rally and shoot.

At the moment Qi Long and the others attacked, deafening sirens tore through the vast and empty space. The entire centre of the base was dominated by this screeching sound. Ling Lan's group knew well that this was definitely the work of those three soldiers hiding in those blind corners. Only they would have had the time to go do such a thing. However, they did not mind. Once they had entered this location, it was impossible for their presence to remain hidden.

Qi Long and the other five's attack speed was extremely quick. Before those soldiers could pull on the trigger of their heavy firearms, Qi Long and company's attacks had already arrived. Qi Long's company knew that the situation was critical, so they used their strongest killing moves from the get-go.

Savage fists flew through the air, leaving explosive sounds in their wake which indicated that should those fists land, severe injury was certain even if death was avoided. Seeing their own heads about to be struck by these heavy blows, instinct made the six soldiers choose to dodge instead of counterattacking. However, even though they managed to dodge the punches, they still did not manage to avoid the needles held between the fingers of Qi Long's company.

Just a simple graze as the points of the needles broke the skin on their cheeks, and their face was instantly bleeding. However, this sort of minor injury was nothing in the eyes of professional soldiers. They were just about to lift their weapons and retaliate with fire when they found that their own arms were beginning to feel weak. Moreover, they actually felt no pain from their wounds...

Was it poison? No, it was an anaesthetic. They felt their entire body beginning to grow numb until they could no longer move... at this time, the men saw those six opponents lift up their hands to jab firmly downwards.

Yes, jab. Because they could see clearly then that the opponents were holding miniature syringes in their hands. When the syringe jabbed into them once again, in the very next second, they had descended into darkness...

Li Shiyu looked at the people who had initially been standing in their way finally falling down unconscious after being hit by his anaesthetic. He found that it was even easier

and more convenient to deal with one's enemies using medication rather than actual combat... he subconsciously looked down at the emptied syringe down in his hands, contemplative. Perhaps he should change his combat style. The results were the same — the enemy would be downed either way — so why shouldn't he make his life easier? Perhaps he should try and apply more of what he had learned into his fighting?

Li Shiyu did not have more time to think beyond that; a dangerous aura suddenly surrounded them. Perhaps having experienced it before, or perhaps because their spiritual power had become familiar with Li Lanfeng's spectre power — this time, when Li Lanfeng activated his spectre power, Qi Long and the others did not feel particularly frightened.

The next second, Li Lanfeng's body suddenly jerked. Even though Qi Long and the others could not see nor feel anything, they knew that the enemy spectres had most likely tried to attack them while Li Lanfeng had protected them.



In the central district of the base, within a beautifully decorated and comfortable hidden room, two black-robed men were sitting with their eyes closed. The body of one of the men swayed violently as a muffled groan emerged from his mouth. Face pale, he opened his eyes and growled, "That bastard D2. Didn't he say that the people sent by the Federation to investigate, including their spectres, had all been drawn over to the trap? Why is there an attack here with such a powerful spectre?"

At these words, the other man opened his eyes in shock. "Carter, you failed?" He had not participated in that attack just now because there were only nine people involved. He thought that his comrade would be able to finish off the group of attackers easily, but his comrade had unexpectedly failed. Moreover, his comrade seemed to have been at a disadvantage against the opponent spectre.

"Yes, the opponent spectre is stronger than me. My attacks were intercepted by him. Pete, let's work together this time. We must make sure they do not return from this attack."

"Okay!" Pete's and Carter's strength levels did not differ by much. Since the opponent was stronger than Carter, he would not be able to handle the opponent alone either. Still, he believed that as long as the two of them worked together to attack, they would definitely be able to bring down this strong spectre of the Federation.

Just thinking that they would be able to kill a powerful spectre filled Pete with excitement. This would mean unparalleled merit! Perhaps his military rank would be pushed higher by this exploit... Pete's eyes gleamed with greed.

Pete was this confident because the two of them had been partners for over 10 years already, so their rapport was excellent. There had been quite a few singled out and isolated spectres who had already died at their hands. Pete did not think that this spectre would be able to withstand their joint attack.



Seeing Li Lanfeng standing still, his expression grim, Qi Long and the others could tell the brutal battle between spectres had already begun. Even within Li Lanfeng's protective range, Qi Long and the others could still feel a sort of invisible pressure as their spiritual power was suppressed by a strange energy. It was extremely uncomfortable. As time went by, the faces of Qi Long and the others began to pale. Even though Li Lanfeng was doing his best to hold the other spectre back, a little of the other spectre's power had still seeped out from under his interception.

And this little bit of spectre power was enough to make them feel the danger. It was as if something was about to devour their souls. Chang Xinyuan, whose spiritual power was relatively weaker, began to cradle his head with a pained expression, slumping to sit on the ground.

Only a little spectre power had leaked — this was not a direct attack — and it was already so painful and unbearable. Only now did Qi Long and the others genuinely comprehend the true horror of spectres. Sure enough, within the virtual world, spectres were death gods. This type of attack on their very soul was something they had no strength to resist.

Seeing that everyone had experienced the horror of spectres, only then did Ling Lan activate her spiritual power to protect the spiritual power of Qi Long and the others. With the additional protection of Ling Lan's spiritual power, colour returned to Qi Long's and the others' faces.

The reason why Ling Lan had not used her spiritual power to protect them to begin with was so that Qi Long and the others could truly comprehend the horror of spectres. This was so that they would not think that spectres were beings they could fight against in future. Before they achieved imperial operator status, anyone would

be defenceless babes in front of spectres, freely available for slaughter.

Ling Lan remembered very well that her dad had said that the existence of spectres was like a type of BUG in the virtual world. Only imperial operators who knew how to manifest their spiritual power outside their body had the ability to resist. However, not all imperial operators knew how to project their spiritual power because the projection of spiritual power was one of the necessary conditions for advancement to god-class operator status. Therefore, god-class operators had no fear of spectres, because they too were god-like existences.

Chapter 332

The Aberrant Modification Innate Talent!

"Boss, your leopard seems to be in bad condition." Following Li Lanfeng's great battle with the two spectres, Little Four very quickly found their hiding place by tracking the other side's spectre power. However, in the meantime, after successive confrontations, Li Lanfeng who had been fighting on his own was gradually put at a disadvantage — the situation looked somewhat precarious.

"How much longer can he hold out for?" Ling Lan's brow creased. The opponent spectres were unexpectedly strong. She had not thought the purely defending Li Lanfeng would be worn down so quickly.

Little Four rolled his eyes dramatically at Ling Lan. How could a confrontation between spectres be as simple as his boss assumed? Although Li Lanfeng's spectre powers were strong, he did not have any true battle experience after all. His methods of resisting were extremely rudimentary, which was why he was being worn down so quickly. Otherwise, with Li Lanfeng's power, which was stronger than the opponents by a bracket, he could have easily held an undefeatable situation with his full focus on defence.

"The main reason is that he does not have enough experience, never having fought other spectres before. Plus, those two people are working together very well, which is why your leopard is being foiled at every turn. Still, your leopard is very smart, actually correcting his mistakes in battle and developing his own defensive manoeuvres. Although the situation is rather worrying, to defeat him, those two people will still have to put in quite a bit of effort," reported Little Four to Ling Lan.

Ling Lan frowned at those words. She was somewhat unsure whether to let Little Four help the leopard to handle those two spectres or to just continue waiting here patiently and let the leopard gain as much combat experience as he could against other spectres.

"Little Four, what is the situation in the base? Is the other side redirecting a large number of ground troops over?" Ling Lan asked Little Four. If a large number of ground forces was mobilised, she would need Little Four to help out then. After all,

their numbers were too few — they had no way to compete with the entire Swift Dragon fleet. Time was of the essence, they could not afford to waste any bit of it.

"Ah, I was just about to tell Boss the news!" replied Little Four suddenly, "The Swift Dragon base has not been alarmed. Other than alerting those within the base command, there has been no other disturbance here. Moreover, the people alerted are not the highest commanding officers of the Swift Dragon base."

"Looks like there is indeed some problem with the Swift Dragon base. Who knows which faction these people are from..." Ling Lan silently mused to herself. Trying to kill them right as soon as they arrived, the spectres here are very likely not actually from the Federation military. Perhaps they had been sent by a hostile nation, or perhaps they were from some of those terrorist organisations rebelling against the Federation.

They must definitely be afraid of exposing themselves, and so did not dare to cause too great of a ruckus. This was also why the Swift Dragon base had not been alerted — they were afraid that the mainframe would discover a problem (they must not yet know that the mainframe is already aware that there is a problem here).

And the purpose of this trip by Ling Lan's team was to find out what exactly had happened at the Swift Dragon base. To make sense of this, it was necessary to uncover the backgrounds of these mysterious hackers and spectres. Thinking about it, the true intention behind the mainframe's assignment of this mission was probably to figure this out...

"Also, those military investigators sent secretly by the mainframe have already been lured to a trap and have already begun fighting. That's why there won't be any other spectres appearing here temporarily," Little Four suddenly interrupted Ling Lan's thoughts to say, "However, there's some bad news. Although there hasn't been much commotion outside, two of the three large mecha troops protecting this base is on their way here now. I estimate that they will be here in one minute."

With a 'thwack', Ling Lan, who was utterly infuriated at this news, instantly flicked a forceful finger onto Little Four's forehead. "You rotten Little Four, why didn't you tell me earlier?"

Little Four cradled his aching head and whined, "Isn't it still in time, telling you now?"

Although what Little Four said was still rather reasonable, Ling Lan completely ignored the pouting Little Four in her mindspace. This Little Four... treat him a little better and his skin would begin to itch with the urge to do off-key things. She must treat him a little harshly for him to be a bit more reliable — Ling Lan truly suspected that Little Four had some masochistic tendencies in his bones.

Ling Lan decisively cast thoughts about Little Four to the back of her mind as she commanded everyone in her team, "All members, enter your mecha and prepare for battle!"

Ling Lan's command was very abrupt, but Qi Long and the others of the old team were already used to this sort of behaviour from Ling Lan. They instantly unleashed their mecha. Li Shiyu and Chang Xinyuan had only joined the team recently after all, so they were stunned for a moment, slower than Qi Long and the others by a beat. However, their reaction was still pretty quick, releasing their mecha right after Qi Long's group of five.

Meanwhile, Li Lanfeng, who was tenaciously fighting against the two spectres, was the last one to let out his mecha. Defending with all his strength, only when he could ensure no disruption to his duty did he allow himself to let out his mecha.

They had just gotten into their mecha when the ground began to quake violently. Only then did they realise why their boss had asked them to get into their mecha. These intense vibrations proved that quite a number of mecha was rapidly approaching them from not too far away. Following the gradually intensifying quaking of the ground, everyone prepared themselves for battle. They each pulled out their cold weapons with their right hands, while their left hands raised their beam guns. The moment Ling Lan gave the command, they would fire.

After about 30 seconds, around 20 mecha appeared ahead of them in an arc formation. Ling Lan calmly observed the distance between the incoming enemy and her team, silently calculating the best time to attack.

Just when they were about 10 metres short of entering each other's shooting range, Ling Lan shouted loudly, "Fire!"

Following this command, everyone raised their beam guns, aimed at their respective targets, and pulled the trigger. Eight beams shot out from the guns at almost the same time in an attack towards the distant enemy.

"Activate beam shields!" Seeing the opposing mecha firing, the invading mecha from the base all activated their beam shields to block. Their numbers were obviously two or three times greater than their opponents. Even if the opponents were attacking them, there were not enough beams to hit all of them. And even if they were hit, the shot mecha might only be hit by just one beam. If any of them were hit twice in a row, then they could consider themselves terribly unlucky today.

Furthermore, their beam shields could withstand three beam attacks without sustaining any damage. Thus, none of these mecha chose to dodge, charging ahead fearlessly instead. They were prepared to overwhelm the opponent with their numbers and utterly destroy these terrorists who had invaded the heart of their base.

Then there was a loud 'boom!' and one of the mecha from the mecha horde from the base suddenly exploded. The tremendous explosion even caused collateral damage to the mecha of his comrades around him. Right after that, not too far off, yet another mecha exploded in a similar manner, just not as frightening as the explosion of the first mecha had been.

"What's going on?" This question emerged suddenly in the minds of all the other mecha operators of the base. However, time did not allow them to think any further on it. On the battlefield, death was extremely commonplace. Thus, they merely carried their doubts in silence and continued to charge forwards.

Ling Lan stared, somewhat dumbfounded, at Chang Xinyuan. The mecha Chang Xinyuan was operating now was not a standard Federation advanced mecha; he had chosen to operate his own intermediate mecha. Having been modified by Chang Xinyuan, although this mecha did not seem very different on the outside, its internal weapons system had already been changed significantly. Ling Lan had already witnessed this back when they had been trying to destroy the door of the transport ship's hold.

Ling Lan knew that Chang Xinyuan's innate talent in modifying mecha was very strong, which was why he had garnered the Thunder King's attention so much that the other had not hesitated to use threatening methods to try and force Chang Xinyuan to join him. Ling Lan had been under the impression that she already had a good grasp of Chang Xinyuan's abilities, but now, from the looks of it, she had still been underestimating his modification innate talent.

Ling Lan had never expected that Chang Xinyuan was not only good at modifying

mecha, he was equally aberrant at modifying weapons. It was previously shown that he had modified the interference missiles in the mecha's head portion, transforming them from weak 'chicken ribs ¹' into extremely powerful heavy-artillery laser cannon shots. Although Chang Xinyuan had categorised those projectiles as immature modifications due to the limited firing range, in Ling Lan's mind, those shots were absolutely a horrific trump card to pull out when circumstances called for it.

Just imagine, when a mecha draws into close-range to fight, no one would ever think to defend against those interference missiles from the head of that mecha. This was because even if they were struck by interference missiles, at most their mecha would be left with several faint and negligible scratches. The mecha would not be significantly damaged, let alone the mecha operator sitting inside it.

Therefore, no one would be on guard against interference missiles. Then, imagine if, at that time, a laser cannon shot were to be unleashed suddenly from the head of that mecha... The power of a laser cannon is several tens or even hundreds of times stronger than that of an interference missile. Undoubtedly, even if the mecha on the receiving end of a laser shot head-on would not be completely destroyed in the blast, the concussive force from the resulting blast would be enough to give them a whole lot of trouble ² — even if they did not die, they would still be half-dead. Thus, the range problem Chang Xinyuan was regretful about was not a problem at all in Ling Lan's eyes.

However, back then, the situation had been pressing, so Ling Lan had not had a chance to discuss this with Chang Xinyuan. Ling Lan had believed that that was already Chang Xinyuan's most outstanding design, but unexpectedly, Chang Xinyuan had given her a great surprise. The one behind the first explosion of the enemy mecha was precisely this Chang Xinyuan who looked like he had the poorest combat capacity.

They were all using beam guns, but Chang Xinyuan's beam gun was not shooting the standard white beams. Instead, the beam from his gun had a thread of strange purple light running through it. This beam instantly eliminated the energy powering the beam shield and caused the mecha it hit to explode violently. Even at the time of explosion, Ling Lan could see slight traces of purple light within the flames...

Meanwhile, the explosion of the other mecha was the result of Ling Lan and her original team members working together. Qi Long and the other four had not chosen to shoot randomly, choosing instead to attack the one target Ling Lan had selected. Struck by six beams at the same time, that mecha's beam shield had no way of holding

out. The natural outcome of this was the explosive destruction of that mecha.

Battlefields were constantly changing — it did not allow for any distraction among the participating fighters. No one else noticed the strange power of Chang Xinyuan's beam gun other than Ling Lan. Qi Long and the others were merely secretly glad that their first attack had been so lucky as to eliminate two mecha. This was extremely advantageous to them.

The fight had just begun and the other side was already down two mecha. Both the team leaders and the team members on the other side returned fire indignantly. Beams shot out simultaneously from both sides, but compared to the other sides' brute force approach, Qi Long's group nimbly evaded the beams heading for them with agile and intricate steps.

Chapter 333

A Weakness Appears!

The steps Qi Long and the others used to evade were not movements that Li Shiyu and the other newer members were familiar with. Only the eyes of Li Lanfeng, who was still fighting the enemy spectres, lit up when he saw those moves. He had seen the rabbit use moves similar to these 7 years ago while they were practising for the assessment. It looked like these techniques must be unique arts from the rabbit's sect. Since Qi Long and the others could learn them, did this mean that he would also be able to learn these moves later on?

The reason why Li Lanfeng would be so taken by this set of steps was that each of the stepping points in the set was exceedingly strange, completely going against conventional logic and laws of inertia. Oftentimes, places which you did not think was possible to get to, you would be able to get there accurately using this set of footwork. This type of utterly unpredictable evasion method would cause all the enemies' attacks to strike air.

Just like Li Lanfeng predicted, this set of footwork which Qi Long and the others were currently displaying was indeed taught to them by Ling Lan. However, it was not like Li Lanfeng believed — these steps were not an exclusive art of Ling Lan's sect but were something Ling Lan had learned in the learning space. It was also the most basic evasion footwork for mecha available in the learning space.

This set of basic evasion footwork from the learning space had been derived over the accumulated tempering of time. Each step in the set was the fruit of concentrated effort from countless mecha operators within the Mandora star system over tens of thousands of years. Ling Lan had tested it — as long as one mastered this set of evasion footwork, learning any of the other so-called advanced evasion techniques of the Federation after that was extremely easy.

Having discovered the benefits, Ling Lan naturally did not forget about her companions. After obtaining permission from Instructor Number Three, she taught this set of footwork to Qi Long and the others. In order for them to integrate this footwork into their instincts, Ling Lan used extremely brutal and punishing training,

just like Instructor Number Three had within the learning space, to force Qi Long and the others to rapidly become used to the steps.

Similarly, Qi Long and the others also thought that these steps were part of General Ling Xiao's legacy. After all, only a god-class operator could have such a strange and inexplicable set of footwork.

Li Lanfeng had already been obsessed with this wondrous set of footwork of the rabbit's ever since he first saw it seven years ago. Now, seeing that there was the possibility of learning it, he was instantly thrilled. This surge in emotion spurred his initially suppressed spectre power to expand rapidly in reaction, instantly flinging off one of the spectre powers attacking him fiercely.

"Pfft!" In the hidden room, one of the black-robed men suddenly threw up a mouthful of blood.

"Pete, what happened?" Seeing this, Carter's expression changed drastically.

"The opponent spectre's power suddenly became stronger. My attack was reflected back at me, so I suffered some injury." Pete rubbed at his brow with his fingers, beginning to soothe his somewhat chaotic spectre power after suffering from the counterattack.

"Could the opponent be playing around with us?" Carter's expression fluctuated uncertainly. The power of a typical spectre was stable and would not suddenly increase by so much at once. The only explanation he could think of was that the opponent had not been going all-out from the start.

Carter's words made Pete's expression change as well. "Then what do we do?" If the other was truly playing a pig to eat a tiger, then they were truly in a very bad position. No one wants to die, even if these people were spectres who had always been reaping the lives of others.

"D*mn, how much longer will they need to handle things over at the trap?" said Carter angrily. In order to ensure their safety, he had immediately contacted D2 who had been holding the fort at the heart of the base, telling him to inform D1 to send another spectre over to help as soon as possible.

D2 had responded quickly, telling Carter that there was a great fight around the trap at the moment. The enemy spectre there was extremely powerful, so they needed two

spectres working together to kill the other. It would be difficult to pull either spectre out for the time being, so he could only ask that they continue to hold on.

D2's words implied that both sides were similarly fighting just one enemy spectre, so why did they need an extra hand when killing the enemy spectre at the trap was only a matter of time? In particular, the part where he told them to continue holding on was obviously tinged with contempt. This made Carter so angry he could feel the rage swell in his chest. In the end, he could only grit his teeth and say that they would take down the enemy spectre on their own, as long as the mecha warriors could handle all the other small fry; the connotation being that these mecha warriors sent by D2 were truly too weak.

These two were so at odds because spectres and hackers belonged to two separate systems in competition with one another, neither willing to back down. Spectres have always considered themselves the gods of the virtual world, able to dictate the life or death of everyone in the virtual world. Meanwhile, hackers were just an inferior bunch of rebels, unstable elements in the virtual world.

In contrast, hackers believed that they themselves were the true masters of the virtual world. They could alter the virtual world with their abilities, even turn the entire virtual world on its head. In their eyes, spectres were just a bunch of demons lurking within the virtual world, a bunch of revolting, dark stinkbugs that made them feel afraid even as they were filled with disgust...

Carter angrily cut off his call with D2. If their superiors had not ordered their group of spectres to listen to the orders of the hackers from group D, he would have long have given the other a taste of what's what.

Knowing that they would not be getting any reinforcements, Carter and Pete held an emergency discussion and then decided to play it a little safer. This time, they would not attack one after the other, but instead attack together. Their original strategy of attacking one after the other was to not give the opponent any time to rest — it was a plan to exhaust the stamina of the other spectre. However, now, in view of the unfathomable power of the opponent, they decided it would be better to attack together for the sake of safety.

Thus, the two of them attacked Li Lanfeng at the same time. This combined spectre attack almost broke Li Lanfeng's layered spectre power defensive shield. He had initially been able to operate his mecha to dodge the enemy mecha's beam attacks, but

now he could no longer spare the effort to do so. Against the simultaneous forceful attack of two spectres, Li Lanfeng needed to use all his strength to withstand it...

During this time, as Qi Long and the others were dodging, they had managed to take down another three mecha by working together. Compared to how easy things seemed to be for Qi Long and the original team members, Li Shiyu was obviously struggling a lot more. He was hit several times by the enemy's beams, but luckily it was only one or two beams each time. With the protection of a beam shield, he had not taken any damage.

However, the situation soon took a turn for the worse. Li Lanfeng's strange behaviour had been noticed by quite a few of the enemy mecha. In contrast to the other unhittable mecha who were evading their attacks so mysteriously, Li Lanfeng's almost immobile mecha was an obvious sitting target. They all knew to go after the weakest link ¹, and so all the attacks of these mecha began to congregate onto Li Lanfeng's mecha.

As he was the closest to Li Lanfeng, Li Shiyu was the first to see the threat to Li Lanfeng. He rushed forwards without hesitation to use his own mecha as a shield.

"Hells!" Qi Long and the others too became aware of the problem now. They all began to gather around Li Lanfeng, and this odd shift brought the attention of all the remaining enemy mecha who had initially been oblivious to the weakness of their team. The number of beams attacking Li Lanfeng's mecha increased even more — with this, even Qi Long and the others had no choice but to control their mecha to block some attacks and try to divert attention. The team was put into a passive position.

Ling Lan was just about to order Little Four to help Li Lanfeng finish off those two spectres when Chang Xinyuan operated his mecha to rush and stand before Li Lanfeng's mecha, shouting, "You all go and finish off the other mecha, I'll protect Li Lanfeng."

Following this cry, Chang Xinyuan's mecha suddenly transformed from a humanoid mecha into a large pot lid ². The large pot lid abruptly stretched and covered Li Lanfeng's mecha entirely...

"Holy crap, Chang Xinyuan, what is this thing?!" Qi Long saw the other's mecha transform into this extremely black, large pot lid and could not help but exclaim in

shock.

"One of my immature designs. I'm not very good at mecha piloting, so I was afraid of pulling down my battle clan in future. That's why I designed this most defensive solution. I call it Divine Turtle Shield. It's used to attract the enemy's fire, allowing my other teammates to attack freely..." explained Chang Xinyuan, "But for now, I can only make this pot lid shape. It's rather far still from my original idea of a turtle's shell, and even its defensive strength is not at the standard I would like."

"How long can it hold out for?" Ling Lan asked as she continued to fire her beam gun. She pulled her trigger consecutively, attacking a particular mecha ten times in succession at the exact same spot, finally destroying that mecha completely.

"It's able to block the simultaneous attacks of 10 beam guns for 10 minutes. The other side has approximately 20 mecha left. I should still be able to hold out for 5 minutes." Hearing Boss Lan ask about his shield, Chang Xinyuan quickly answered without daring to include any irrelevant chatter. Facing Ling Lan, Chang Xinyuan was still rather timid.

"Good! Chang Xinyuan, mark this down as a merit for yourself. Lingtian Battle Clan, follow me!" With no more worries holding her back, Ling Lan gave this direct order and then charged on her own out into the fray.

Ling Lan was not a person who liked to attack passively; she liked taking the initiative. Since Li Lanfeng was being protected by Chang Xinyuan and would not be in any danger for the next five minutes, she decided to go head to head with the enemy. Only in this way would they be able to hinder the other side's unbridled attack on Li Lanfeng so Chang Xinyuan would be able to hold out for even longer.

As for those two spectres, Ling Lan was prepared to let Li Lanfeng continue playing with them, with Little Four acting as an alert guardian. Ling Lan felt that it was worth taking the risk if Li Lanfeng could gain a little more experience. After all, a battle between spectres was not so easy to come across.

Howling exuberantly, Qi Long and the others charged out after Ling Lan. Finally, the blades of the two sides clashed, and the enemy mecha's thoughts of steamrolling their opponent by relying on their numbers were thoroughly crushed by Ling Lan.

In order to bring her full combat power into play, Ling Lan was using the standard

Federation advanced mecha which was at the same level as the enemy mecha. Meanwhile, Ling Lan's true level had long been at mecha master level though Ling Lan was unsure whether she was in special-class level or already in ace level. This was because she had promised her father before that before she managed to gather enough points in Mecha World to redeem an equivalent mecha, she would not cross-levels to operate a more advanced mecha.

Of course, when Ling Xiao had found out that the mission she had received this time was an SSS-rank mission, in order to ensure Ling Lan's safety, Ling Xiao had handed his own imperial mecha <Wind's Shadow> to her and permitted her to use it at critical moments. Thus, finally operating a more suitably advanced mecha, Ling Lan's sealed powers were beginning to manifest. Like a wolf let loose into a flock of sheep, she began her wild massacre.

A sharp roundhouse kick sent the 4 or 5 mecha around her flying. And as they were flailing around defenceless, she raised the beam gun in her right hand and sent a barrage of shots firing at those mecha's cockpits.

Her super strong close-range combat skills combined with perfect and accurate marksmanship caused three mecha to explode in an instant. Ling Lan's super strong attack power flabbergasted the surrounding enemy mecha. In unplanned unison, they actually stopped their attacks to stare dumbly at that fearsome mecha standing tall within the raging flames and thick smoke.

Chapter 334

An Intense Battle!

In another hidden room, D2 was directing the hackers as they put their full effort on carrying out project T. Witnessing this scene unfold, D2 could not help but cry out, "He cannot be just an advanced mecha warrior! He must be an ace mecha master..."

Sitting beside D2, cold sweat poured from D3's forehead as he urged D2 anxiously, "Quick, inform D1 to send our ace operator over. Otherwise, relying on these mecha warriors alone, we won't be able to stop him."

D3's reminder abruptly jolted D2 to awareness. Project T was just a little short of success now — if the opponent managed to break into this area, all their previous efforts would be for naught. Thus, they quickly contacted D1, but the news they received in return was that the fight at the trap area had fallen into a stalemate. An ace operator who was infinitely close to breaking through into imperial status had appeared there as well, and their ace operator was currently already engaged in battle there.

"We need to stall." Seeing Ling Lan's team finish off another 4 or 5 mecha, D2 knew he could not afford to hesitate any longer. He decisively sent the remaining two mecha teams over.

"How much longer will it take to succeed?" D2 asked one of his subordinate hackers who was carefully channelling his hacker power into a black box inside the hidden room after the mecha teams had left at a sprint towards the battlefield on his orders.

"It has already entered the propagation stage. Based on this speed, we need at least one more hour for proper formation." The subordinate hacker wiped away the cold sweat on his forehead and answered softly.

"Can't you speed it up at all?" When D2 heard they would still need an hour, he frowned.

"No more than we have. Any faster and it'll be dangerous. They will devour our power, all of it..." When the subordinate hacker heard the request to speed up, his face

instantly changed. He had been there during the research process of the T-virus. Previously, someone had once tried to speed up the cultivation process by sending great amounts of hacker power at it, but in the end, he had been consumed mercilessly by the T-virus. That person's final outcome had been death.

His subordinate's reminder calmed D2 down. He too knew of that incident that year and knew the cultivation of the T-virus could not be rushed. He could only hope that everything would turn out well — as long as the cultivation succeeded, they could then leave the virtual world and quietly wait for the victory the T-virus would deliver to them. The Chinese Federation would be their prize.

"Boss, they've sent another two mecha teams over." The mecha teams' movements naturally could not be concealed from Little Four who was closely monitoring the secret base. This time, Little Four had learned from his previous mistakes — he immediately reported this to his boss so that his boss would not flick him in the head and bully him again.

"D*mmmit, forcing me to go all out." Ling Lan placed all of the energy blocks she had in her bag into the standard Federation advanced mecha she was currently piloting. If not for the fact that crossing levels to operate a higher level mecha was a great burden on the body, Ling Lan would have liked to use the imperial mecha more. Its standard-equipped six-tube maglev ¹ cannon would need only 3 to 4 shots to finish off all these mecha operators.

Ling Lan sighed internally. For now, imperial mecha could only be a last resort, not to be used unless absolutely necessary. She knew well that based on her current level of strength, she could only operate an imperial mecha for 5 minutes. Beyond 5 minutes, her body would not be able to endure the tremendous feedback force generated by cross-level mecha operation and would collapse completely.

Doing such an idiotic thing in the enemy's main camp was utter suicide — Ling Lan would definitely not let herself fall into such a desperate situation just to show off momentarily.

Ling Lan had just filled her power up to the brim when she felt a faint vibration coming from the ground. It went without saying that the final two mecha teams of the heart of the secret base were rushing over. Ling Lan's team needed to finish off these enemy mecha before them now before those mecha arrived. Otherwise, with the addition of 20 or more mecha, they would not be able to hold out no matter how strong their

control skills were.

"The enemy is sending reinforcements. Hurry up and kill off these mecha." Ling Lan connected to the team's dedicated channel and issued a decisive order. (Little Four had created this dedicated channel for the nine of them at the moment they had boarded their mecha.)

Everyone knew the situation was critical and that they needed to go all out. Like Ling Lan, they plugged in the spare energy blocks they had in their bags, making sure their mecha were fully charged. In the upcoming battle, they would no longer try to save power by sealing away some of the advanced techniques that consumed a lot of energy.

Qi Long and the original four plus Li Shiyu each controlled their own mecha and began sprinting. They weaved left and right as they ran so that the enemy could not predict their route, and so could not hit them with beam guns. Furthermore, this kind of airy and mobile running method made the enemy unable to determine which target they were aiming for...

All the enemy mecha became nervous, because any of their remaining group of 18 mecha could become the attack target of the six incoming opponents. Suddenly, the figures of the six fluttering mecha vanished... Oh, no, not vanished, rather, the six were drawing indistinct ephemeral streaks of light through the air. This was the advanced technique only advanced mecha warriors could learn — Light-and-Shadow Slidestep.

There were two types of footwork techniques for advanced mecha warriors. One was the Z-flicker, which was in fact what Qi Long and the others had been using at first, while the other was the Light-and-Shadow Slidestep they were displaying now. The reason why they had chosen to use the Light-and-Shadow Slidestep in this final attack with unplanned synchronicity was because the technique not only functioned to increase speed but also had the effect of confusing the enemy. It would cause a display lag on the external cameras of enemy mecha, making it difficult for the enemy to determine their true position and attack timing.

Of course, experienced advanced mecha warriors could make judgements based on pure experience and would not be fooled by the Light-and-Shadow Slidestep... however, these mecha operators before them now were not truly controlled by humans but were true NPCs. Right after engaging them in combat, Qi Long and the others had already figured this out.

In the settings of the mainframe, these NPCs only had 20% probability of not being confounded. In other words, the likelihood of them being confounded was rather high. Meanwhile, Qi Long and the others ignored these NPC mecha's wild beam attacks. The next second, they were already before their respective target mecha, ruthlessly lifting up their cold weapons to swing it down savagely at the opponent.

The beam shields of mecha could be said to be specially designed to deal with a variety of energy weapons such as beam guns — against cold weapons which were pure physical violence, beam shields were rather weak.

Five mecha were subject to fierce chops by Qi Long's group. The strikes instantly broke through the energy of the beam shields and the powerful force behind the blows slammed into the enemy mecha. The intense collision between weapon and mecha instantly created a string of sparks.

Qi Long and the others had not been attacking mindlessly — the areas they had chosen to attack were the various joints of the mecha. In order to maintain the flexibility of mecha, the defensive strength of certain areas needed to be sacrificed during the manufacture of mecha. For instance, at the shoulders, the neck, the hips, the arms, the ankles, the knees and so on. Their chosen target areas made their attacks effective immediately, directly destroying a part of the mecha.

Only one mecha managed to dodge the crisis this time. It had fallen into the 20% chance of not being confounded — it could be said that mecha had been extremely lucky. The one who failed was Luo Lang and this made Luo Lang rather displeased, unable to figure out why he was the only one so unlucky.

Luo Lang gritted his teeth and followed up with another attack. Since he had failed, he would just have to make up for it. He did not believe that the enemy would still be so lucky to fall into that 20% the next time he attacked.

Luo Lang was full of confidence for his attack this time, but when he found that he had once again struck air, his entire pert face became flushed red with anger. D*mmmit! Even if his appearance was a little feminine, that didn't mean others could look down on him like he was a girl!

Fuming, Luo Lang followed up with another Light-and-Shadow Slidestep. It looked like Luo Lang had decided to challenge the mainframe till the end. He just did not believe this NPC mecha warrior would truly be so lucky and avoid being confounded three

times in a row...

Dreams are beautiful but reality is cruel — Luo Lang's confidence-filled third attack was once again evaded by the NPC. Right then, Luo Lang could not stop himself from cursing, "Bastard..."



Meanwhile, Ling Lan, who was attacking with both hands, had also been using the Light-and-Shadow Slidestep. Against real people, this technique more or less had its weaknesses, but against NPCs, it was extremely effective and was one of the primary techniques for all players. The cold weapon she was using right now was the wondrous weapon Regretless that Chang Xinyuan had forged. The special sharpness Regretless possessed was displayed to maximum effect by Ling Lan at this moment.

With a swing to the left and a slash to the right, Ling Lan instantly split open the outer shell of two mecha before her. She felt that the tough outer shell of mecha was not as sturdy as she had imagined... her swings had sliced through easily, chopping right into the cockpit of the mecha.

The cockpit of a mecha was its most deadly weakness because the operator was housed within it. Whether it was an NPC or a real human pilot, once the mecha's cockpit was struck, the mainframe would judge that a devastating blow had been struck to the mecha. Sure enough, the mecha exploded and on Ling Lan's screen, the notification window indicated that the enemy mecha had been utterly destroyed.

Seeing this, Ling Lan could not help but blink, stunned, glancing over at Regretless in her hand in disbelief. She had always known Regretless was sharp, but she had not imagined that it was *this* sharp. A standard advanced mecha in Mecha World actually could not even hold up against even one of its attacks.

Right then, an enemy mecha behind Ling Lan saw that Ling Lan had stopped moving after destroying two of his comrades. Thinking that he had a chance for revenge, he swiftly raised the cold weapon in his hands and swung it fiercely at the back of Ling Lan's head.

Ling Lan, who had the entire situation in hand, thrust Regretless backwards without hesitation. This move was so concealed and sudden that the other mecha had no time to react, instantly pierced through the cockpit by Regretless.

The highly raised cold weapon in that mecha's hands was now powerless to chop downwards. Executing a scorpion kick ², she kicked out powerfully, sending that mecha flying to crash into the back of another mecha who was desperately attacking Chang Xinyuan's pot lid with its cold weapon. The sudden attack from behind him did not give that mecha any time to react. He stumbled forwards uncontrollably, falling onto Chang Xinyuan's pot lid mecha, his attack interrupted.

He was just about to struggle his way up from Chang Xinyuan's pot lid mecha, when two huge sets of teeth appeared on both sides of the pot lid to bite down mercilessly on that mecha. As the pot lid was completely swarmed by enemy mecha, no one saw when the centre of the pot lid suddenly split open slightly to form a round hole. Then, a beam twined with purple shot out at the mecha caught in the grasp of the teeth, blasting a hole of about 50 centimetres in radius through the mecha. The spot it blasted though was precisely the cockpit of the mecha. And thus, the enemy mecha fell to Chang Xinyuan's pot lid mecha...

Chapter 335

Destroy Them All!

As for that mecha which had been sent flying by Ling Lan's kick, after its collision with its allied mecha, it had bounced back to crash into the ground and had not gotten up again after that.

If anyone was paying attention, they would see a long and flat opening at the heart of the mecha's cockpit. Blood was dripping slowly from it, gradually staining the ground below it red...

Having eliminated both mecha on her end, Ling Lan saw Luo Lang's third failure and decisively raised her right arm and shot a torrent of beams from her beam gun at his opponent, striking that mecha at its knee.

The knee was the weakest point of defence in a mecha. Hit so suddenly by Ling Lan's attack, it instantly burst into a small shower of sparks, and the mecha's evasive movements slowed.

At this moment, Luo Lang, who had still not given up, used the Light-and-Shadow Slidestep for the fourth time, swinging the cold weapon in his hands angrily at his opponent's neck. Perhaps because its knee was already broken, causing the mecha to be unable to retain its balance, and also because Luo Lang's angry swing had an unusual amount of power behind it, the mecha was instantly sent crashing to the ground by the blow.

Luo Lang was unforgiving once he gained the upper hand. Once again he raised his cold weapon and began slashing it down again and again like a wild thunderstorm down at that mecha on the ground, so mad and violent that it seemed like he wanted to dice the mecha up into a heap of scrap metal. Perhaps even the NPC mecha did not want to suffer such abuse, finally deciding to self-destruct. Fortunately, Luo Lang had good reflexes and managed to avoid the resulting explosion and did not receive much damage.

However, this scene just made Luo Lang even angrier. He truly felt that the mainframe was absolutely picking on him. None of the others' opponents had self-destructed,

while his had just happened to choose to try for mutual destruction? Once more he charged forwards, kicking out fiercely at the burning scrap heap. That bundle of scraps was sent flying, and by sheer unfortunate coincidence, it was flying in Ling Lan's direction...

At this time, Ling Lan was fighting with two other mecha. Her Regretless was clashing violently with the cold weapon of one mecha, while on her right, another mecha's cold weapon was slashing down ferociously at Ling Lan's head. It wasn't that Ling Lan did not have any room to dodge to, but it just so happened that the flaming bundle of scraps Luo Lang had kicked had appeared at the spot she would have dodged to.

Luo Lang's initially towering rage was instantly doused by this scene. He felt a chill shoot into his bones and there was only one thought in his mind... he was dead meat. He jerked and shouted, "Boss, dodge!"

Facing this dilemma where either choice would result in a hit, Ling Lan just calmly kicked out against the mecha on her left who had been crossing blades with her, sending the other stumbling back a step. Then, with a spin of Regretless, she smacked that flaming ball of scraps and sent it flying towards that mecha which had stumbled back from her kick. That enemy mecha had not expected the fireball flying towards his opponent to suddenly fly at him instead; he was hit directly. The great force behind the crash made him stumble back uncontrollably for another 4 or 5 steps before he managed to catch himself.

Although Ling Lan had dodged this flying accident, she now had no time to avoid the other mecha's overhead strike. But then, something miraculous happened. Borrowing the force of the smack she gave to the fireball, Ling Lan's mecha slid in the opposite direction for about one metre, and this one metre allowed her to narrowly escape that fierce slash by the enemy mecha.

After evading the attack, taking advantage of the other mecha being caught in the tail-end of its attack, Ling Lan executed a flick and swish — with a cold flash of light, Regretless lopped off the enemy mecha's right arm. Ling Lan's attack did not stop there. Right afterwards, she pushed off her right foot and her entire mecha leapt into the air till she was about 7 to 8 metres off the ground. There, she lifted her right leg high before kicking out in a downwards side kick.

A loud 'bang' rang out as her right kick struck the mecha which had lost its right arm. The great force applied from above it sent the mecha crashing to the ground...

As Ling Lan's mecha descended, Regretless drew a lovely arc through the air. In the end, with its tip pointed downwards, it stabbed right through the mecha's cockpit. This series of actions were completed in the blink of an eye...

When Luo Lang saw that Ling Lan had avoided the flying accident he had kicked over, he instantly let out a sigh of relief. But before he could rejoice for long, he heard Ling Lan say glacially, "Luo Lang, when we return, private room training for a week!" As she said this, Ling Lan was coldly pulling Regretless out from the enemy mecha's cockpit.

"Ah..." Luo Lang groaned. He had only been venting a little — who knew things would end this way? One week of training in a private room, under Boss Lan's savage treatment... would he survive?

"Not continuing to fight yet? Do you want private room training for two weeks?" Before Luo Lang's groan had fully faded, Ling Lan's icy voice had risen eerily in the team's comms once more. Thus, Luo Lang's initial mournful groan instantly became a savage howl as he leapt like a rabid wolf at one of the final remaining mecha.

Qi Long and the other three had just finished off their own opponents when they heard Ling Lan's warning words to Luo Lang. Cold air seeped into their hearts and without even thinking about it, they too quickly leapt savagely towards those few remaining mecha...

Boo hoo hoo, Boss, we're performing so well. Don't take out your anger on us please. If you want to hold private room training, please just take the main culprit Luo Lang. Please don't involve us.

The brutality of private room training was to the extent that the faces of Qi Long and the others would drain of colour at the mere mention of it. In order to avoid letting themselves experience such deep and enduring pain again, Qi Long and the others pushed themselves to their maximum combat power, beating their opponents so completely that they could not resist at all...

Right then, Li Shiyu had also confronted the last enemy. Baffled, he glanced at Qi Long and the others, unsure why they were acting like they had ingested some high-effect stimulants. Their battle power now was at a completely different level from before... could it be that there was some hidden secret behind private room training? Perhaps it would be helpful for his research into developing the potential of the human body so he should find team leader Ling to discuss it properly? This was what Li Shiyu

thought.

Qi Long and the other few fighting to the best of their ability suddenly felt a chill rise from within their very bones... was their boss truly thinking about throwing them all into private room training? At the thought of this possibility, they began fighting even harder, wishing they could kill off all the mecha before them immediately so they could tell Boss that they definitely did not need to go back for some private room training.

Their ramped up performance let Qi Long and the others finish off their respective opponents within one minute. Seeing their initial numbers, which had been several times more than the invaders, instantly decimated by these enemies who had invaded the secret base, that mecha which had been sent stumbling away from Ling Lan due to its collision with the fireball could only stare in frozen fear as Ling Lan stalked towards him with a bloody Regretless in her hands...

Gripping his weapon tightly, he stared with red eyes at the demon that had killed almost half of their mecha in an instant. Seeing the other getting closer and closer, he finally roared angrily and turned to run...

"Hah? Actually choosing to run?" Ling Lan was stunned. She had initially thought NPC soldiers were all set by the mainframe to fight to the death. Unexpectedly, there were some who would react like real people and choose to run. At this time, the reinforcements the enemy had sent had already appeared within their visual range, the vibrations of the ground becoming very intense... an extremely subtle sneer appeared on Ling Lan's lips. With a swing of her right arm, Regretless flew like a bolt of cold light to pierce through that escaping mecha.

"Ahh..." The NPC operating this mecha let out a terrible scream. His body had been cut into half by that fearsome demon-sword. In the throes of the soul-consuming pain, he could see his internal organs spilling out from the large gash at his waist, accompanied by a fountain of blood...

Blearily, he looked at the allied troops only 500 to 600 metres away from him. He really wanted to tell them to run quickly — this group of people were demons and not something they could fight... but he could no longer make any sound. He could almost see what the final outcome of these comrades would be. Like them, these new troops would drink their fill of regret and become lost souls...

A squelch rang out suddenly by his ears. He stared helplessly as that demon-sword

which had cut him in half left his cockpit. He knew that the demon must have come to retrieve his demon-sword. He really wanted to grab the sword, hoping to stop the demon from continuing to harm his allies with it. He used the last bit of his strength to stretch out his right hand...

Could he not catch the sword? He watched as the demon-sword disappeared from sight and left his cockpit completely. Dejected, he raised his right hand and found that his five fingers were gone... it turned out that he had actually managed to touch the demon-sword just now!

As expected of a demon-sword! In the end, he swallowed his last breath gripped by this final shock. Even in death his eyes remained open!

After retrieving Regretless, Ling Lan looked at the last two mecha teams approaching them rapidly and coldly gave her orders to the team, "Destroy them all!"



In the distant Caesar Empire, in an experimental hall of a military secret base, everyone was closely observing the thirty or so virtual login pods in the hall. Although they were trying their best to maintain their calm, they could hardly conceal their nerves and excitement.

According to the estimated time, after just a few more minutes, their plan was going to succeed. And the result of this success was something that would drive the entirety of Caesar wild — it would allow the Caesar Empire to become the hegemon ¹ of the solar system at once. Ever since the Chinese Federation had caught up to them 5000 years ago, they had lost the sole position of hegemon and could only share that honour with the Chinese Federation. It should be known that in the history of the Caesar Empire, they had ruled this star system for a whole 7000 years.

How could they allow outsiders to sleep at their bedside ²? They had already tolerated the Chinese Federation for 5000 years — now they could finally get rid of their rival and taste their heart's desire.

"Beep beep beep..." Two of the login pods suddenly emitted emergency sounds. This likely meant that either something had happened to or there was some danger to the people inside those pods.

This situation made the faces of everyone in the hall change as they rushed towards those two virtual pods. The pods were quickly opened and the nutrient fluid inside was quickly drained away. However, the people inside who should have woken up remained unresponsive, lying inside with their eyes closed as if they were deeply asleep.

Chapter 336

Tricked!

Seeing this, a lieutenant general with two stars on his shoulder, the person in charge here, immediately instructed medical specialists to step forward and check on the men. Two medical professionals in white coats, each holding a small portable instrument, went over respectively to one of the virtual pods.

The instruments were soon connected to the men lying inside the pods. Looking at the data reflected by the instrument, the expressions of the two experts became darker and darker. In the end, they could only stand up, shaking their heads, and tell everyone that the brains of the two people in the pods were completely destroyed. In medical terms, brain death. Even though their hearts were still beating, they were actually already dead.

"How can this be? They are elites from our bureau. They cannot be dead. You must have made a mistake." Hearing the professionals' declaration, a major general of around 40 years of age could not help but point fingers.

"Wilson, calm down!" The lieutenant general barked, shocking Major General Wilson out of his rage. He squatted down with his hands around his head, muttering uncontrollably under his breath, "What in the world could have happened? Why are Pete and Carter dead? Could it be that the Chinese Federation has discovered our plot?"

"Didn't D1 say that everything was going well?" As if thinking of something, Wilson suddenly jerked his head up to stare sharply at someone in the crowd. It was a middle-aged man who was also at the rank of major general.

"Although D1's group has successfully infiltrated the virtual world of the Chinese Federation, there are many limitations. We cannot transmit any messages, and so can only wait for them to send someone back to find out anything about what's going on. The latest news we have is from two days ago, when they suspected that the Chinese Federation had sent someone over to investigate. In order to ensure the success of the plan, they requested the help of some spectres..." That major general was frowning as he gave a brief explanation to Wilson.

Major General Wilson wanted to retort, but at this moment, the lieutenant general walked over and patted him on the shoulder in comfort and said, "Even though Pete and Carter are dead, this does not mean the project will not succeed. For the Empire, some sacrifices are necessary. Let us wait another 5 minutes and we will know what the results are."

The lieutenant general's words of consolation made Wilson stop talking, merely waiting patiently for these final 5 minutes to pass. He too wished that the project would succeed so that Pete's and Carter's sacrifice would become worthwhile.



Meanwhile, in the virtual world, D2, who was holding the fort in the secret research centre of the Swift Dragon base, saw the two mecha teams he sent finally manage to stall the invading enemy at the central square of the base. He temporarily relaxed but kept a close eye on the surveillance monitors of the central square to observe the situation between the two fighting parties, and he did not forget to ask his subordinate hacker about the progress of the evolution of the T-virus.

As the time ticked closer and closer to the completion stage, while that invading mecha team still continued to tussle with the two mecha teams of the secret base, only then did D2's heart finally settle...

After this period of fighting, six of the nine mecha which had snuck in had already been taken down, while there were only five more mecha left from the two mecha teams sent. Both sides were scarred from the battle. D2 did not care. After all, the mecha teams protecting the secret base were all the original mecha teams from the Swift Dragon base and had nothing at all to do with them.

D2 only cared about whether the mecha teams could complete their task of holding back the invading mecha until the T-virus was successfully cultivated. And now, it looked like the mecha teams were performing pretty well, successfully completing the task they had been assigned.

At this time, even if the other party managed to finish off these final five mecha, they would no longer have time to rush over and stop their operation. The scene of him becoming the primary hero of the Empire rose in his mind's eye. He was receiving the Supreme Medal of Honour from the Great Emperor and enjoying the frenzied adoration of his fellow countrymen in front of the House of Parliament...



In another hidden room, the two spectres who had been fighting all this while with Li Lanfeng were already panting heavily with exhaustion. They had almost used up all of their spectre power but still had not been able to break the other's defences.

"What's going on? Why is the opponent getting stronger as we fight? At first, there would still be some fluctuations in his defensive power, even some openings. Why has it become so strong and impenetrable from half an hour before? We've been attacking for so long and there's no effect at all?" Carter asked Pete who was beside him as he panted. This truly did not adhere to the common sense of spectre battles.

Pete initially had not thought much about it, but when he heard Carter's question, a jolt ran through his heart. He was just about to say something when his heart began to pound in a warning from their spectre abilities. Their faces changed drastically and they hurried to pull back the spectre power they were using to fight the opponent, but it was too late.

A powerful, overwhelming surge of energy wrapped their spectre powers completely and then pulverised it. They could only hear their own spiritual power being squeezed like a water balloon and then there was a pop... and then there was no more.

No one saw as their bodies became tiny particles slowly dissipating into the air. This meant that their consciousness had been successfully erased.

"Boss, mission complete!" Little Four reported smugly to Ling Lan after returning to Ling Lan's mindspace.

In fact, from half an hour ago, Little Four had silently begun intercepting the attacks of the two men. Li Lanfeng had been rather baffled by this, wondering why those two spectres attacking him had suddenly disappeared. Because Little Four's energy was too powerful yet very hard to detect, Li Lanfeng did not discover the truth.

Ling Lan rubbed Little Four's head in satisfaction and looked towards the doors, asking, "Little Four, is this the place?"

"Yup, they're right inside. I sensed a familiar energy from inside. If Boss had not stopped me from going in, I would have long gone to find out what that energy is," grumbled Little Four.

"I'll bring you in immediately and you'll finally find out what the final answer for this mission is." Ling Lan instructed Little Four to prepare to open the door. Right then, Ling Lan had already stowed away her mecha, while the other eight members of her team, who had similarly put away their mecha, were hiding behind both sides of the door. They were already holding onto their own laser weapons, prepared to rush in at first notice to take control of the situation inside instantly.

"4 minutes and 30 seconds to go for the T-virus to mature," said that hacker subordinate who had been in charge of cultivating the T-virus all this while, sounding pleasantly surprised as he looked at the data reflected on the screen. Previously, they could only make rough estimates, but now, they could really determine the exact time the T-virus would be born.

When D2 and D3 heard this news, they instantly ran excitedly to the screen monitoring the cultivation of the T-virus to wait together for the last four minutes or so till the T-virus came into the world. Right then, the doors which had been shut tightly all this time were suddenly flung open. Before they could even react, a team of warriors dressed in night combat clothes suddenly charged into the room with short laser handguns aimed at them, shouting, "Don't move!"

There were a few people in the room who had quick reflexes — they were just about to pull their own guns when the well-prepared opponents shot them in the arm, preventing their resistance. D2 saw that they had no chance at all, and so indicated for everyone to calm down.

The situation was very quickly controlled. At this moment, crisp footsteps could be heard coming from the doorway and then a person with a cool demeanour surrounded by cold air walked through it. His cold gaze swept dispassionately over them and actually made their hearts quiver unexpectedly.

"Boss, task complete!" Qi Long waved his laser handgun excitedly at Ling Lan. Whether it was in the real world or here in the virtual world, they would never lack for this kind of thrilling battle following Boss. Qi Long felt that he had truly fallen in love with this type of exciting lifestyle.

D2 saw the final person who walked in and knew that he had been tricked, because this person was that strongest mecha warrior still fighting with the mecha teams of the base on the monitor screens right now.

D2 and D3 reflexively glanced at each other, knowing that they needed to delay. Even if they all died here, they needed to complete their mission.

"Who are you people? What are you doing here?" Turning back to face the invaders, D2 pretended he knew nothing and acted just like an NPC would, asking in a shocked manner.

He only received silence in response, however, as Qi Long and the others naturally would not say much with their boss around. As for Ling Lan, right then, her attention had been pulled away by Little Four in the mindscape.

The moment she had entered this hidden room, Little Four had suddenly become extremely excited and had actually ignored her original warnings to run out. In the virtual world, Little Four could roam freely, unlike in the real world where he could only follow Ling Lan.

One second later, Little Four returned, his expression pleased and surprised, and he could not conceal his excitement as he said, "Boss, I've discovered something great!"

"Oh? What is it?" asked Ling Lan calmly.

"Boss, it's incredible. I never expected this world to actually have such a thing." Little Four's expression was dreamy. Till now, he could not comprehend why this thing would appear here. Logically, with this world's technology, this thing should never be here.

"What in the world is this thing?" Ling Lan sweatdropped. This Little Four seemed to be so astounded by this thing that he was ungrounded, completely out of sorts.

"It's a type of virus, right over there. They seem to be in the process of cultivating it. This type of virus is really too famous in our Mandora star system. Back then it almost destroyed our great virtual world and killed off all of us intelligence entities. Luckily, we had a powerful mainframe computer so in the end we managed to resolve the situation." Little Four's proud tone had a trace of cold fear running through it, as if extremely afraid of that virus.

Ling Lan looked in the direction Little Four had pointed out. D2 and D3 saw Ling Lan's line of sight turn towards the T-virus and were startled. Their bodies jerked involuntarily but they forcefully suppressed the reflex. They were well aware that they could not be too impetuous, or else the other side would become suspicious. They just

needed another three minutes or so for the tides to turn and for success to fall to them.

Ling Lan walked over and one of the hackers tried to stop her from approaching. But before he could do anything, he had been pushed aside by Luo Lang who had been following right behind Ling Lan.

Chapter 337

T-Virus?

Only then did Ling Lan move forwards to find a large display screen before her. On it, countless codes were flashing by swiftly, and right at the top, there was an image of a cocoon. It was pulsing violently like a heart as a string of numbers counted down beside it.

Ling Lan tapped on that image and asked Little Four, *"Is this it?"*

"Yup, it'll be born in another three minutes or so. I did not expect your technology here to actually be able to cultivate the larvae of this virus. It's truly amazing!" exclaimed Little Four.

"How harmful is this virus?" Ling Lan thought of the computer viruses back in her previous world — those viruses would always cause various kinds of problems for those networks that got infected — and she could not help but ask worriedly.

"It would cause the virtual world here to collapse, but it will still be a baby when it's born and can only do so much. Once it matures, it'll be able to consume some of those people with low spiritual power..." Little Four told Ling Lan about the harm the virus could cause. *"In fact, once matured, it can be called an artificial virtual version of a spectre. As long as someone has less spiritual power than the virus, it will consume them."*

"This thing is truly vicious!" Ling Lan's brow furrowed and she slammed a heavy fist onto that image. *"It looks like there's an organisation that wants to destroy our virtual world and even kill the people of the Federation... what is this virus called, and do you have a way to resolve it?"*

"We call it the Doomsday Flower on Mandora, because its matured form really resembles a flower," said Little Four proudly, *"We successfully cleared it out on Mandora. In my databases, I naturally have the solution for it, not to mention that it still hasn't even been born yet."*

"Then help me destroy it completely. This type of malicious virus should not exist in this world," said Ling Lan, tone tinged with revulsion.

"Got it, Boss. I'll handle it immediately." Ling Lan had given her orders, so of course Little Four would carry them out perfectly. In the next second, Little Four had once again disappeared from Ling Lan's mindspace. Ling Lan knew that Little Four must have gone to wipe out that Doomsday Flower virus.

Ling Lan believed in Little Four. Since Little Four said there would be no problems, then there would certainly be nothing to worry about, so she set this matter aside. She walked over to a chair by the side and sat down. Seeing this, Luo Lang automatically moved to stand behind Ling Lan. Li Lanfeng's gaze flickered, and he also walked over...

He would not hand over the position beside the rabbit to anyone! Li Lanfeng wanted to proclaim this point to everyone from this point onwards.

Ling Lan was not at all concerned over Li Lanfeng's and Luo Lang's actions. Settled in her seat, she tapped on the armrest and suddenly raised her head to look at D2 and asked, "Which faction are you all from?"

When Ling Lan had pounded the image of the cocoon earlier, D2 had been extremely nervous, afraid that the other would notice something and think of a way to destroy it. Although there were still 3 minutes before the virus would be done and D2 did not believe the other side would be able to do anything to destroy the T-virus in this short duration of time, for safety's sake, he still did not wish for the opponent to notice anything.

Now, seeing Ling Lan leave the virus alone to turn around and ask him this insignificant question, his heart relaxed. His mind spun quickly and he decided to chatter aimlessly with the other for a while and distract them in these final three minutes.

Having made up his mind, D2 calmly replied, "I'm of course someone from the Swift Dragon base. Who the hell are you people? Why did you sneak into our base?"

Ling Lan raised an eyebrow and she clapped her hands slowly, saying, "Stop acting. You and I are both real people. Just looking at your outfits I can tell you all are a bunch of hackers. The mainframe already knows something is up here, which is why it sent us over to investigate. I don't want to hear you all say any more nonsense. If you don't want to talk, that's fine, I'm sure I can find someone who's willing to tell me."

At this point, Ling Lan turned her head slightly to the side and said to Li Lanfeng who

was standing beside her, "Leopard, if he doesn't want to speak, you can..." Ling Lan made a swiping motion across her neck.

Li Lanfeng knew what Ling Lan truly meant with this gesture. He definitely wanted him to use his spectre abilities to kill the other party for a cautionary effect.

Beside Qi Long, controlling the scene along with him, Li Shiyu could not help but frown slightly when he saw Ling Lan's gesture towards Li Lanfeng, a sense of aversion rising in his heart. However, he resolutely turned away and hardened his heart. Li Shiyu knew that they could not be merciful with their enemies at this time. And wasn't it the opponent who had sent two spectres to attack them from the start to kill them all? If Li Lanfeng had not been a spectre and protected them, they would probably all be dead by now.

Although Li Shiyu was rather compassionate, he understood well when he could be merciful and when he could not.

Qi Long and the others had no objection to the proceedings — back when they had only been ten, they had already witnessed Ling Lan piloting a mecha to kill enemy mecha operators before their eyes. They had long become accustomed to Ling Lan's ruthlessness, and besides, they had been taught from young that they needed to show no mercy to their enemies.

D2 did not understand the deeper meaning behind Ling Lan's warning. Stubbornly, he shouted, "You thugs, don't expect to make me submit! I will definitely report this to the senior officer and have him send soldiers over to kill you all..."

At this point of his speech, Ling Lan said nothing, only coolly making the kill gesture to Li Lanfeng.

This was Li Lanfeng's first time killing anyone — whether it was in the real world or in the virtual world, he had never killed anyone before this. Li Lanfeng was under extreme mental pressure, but he did not want the rabbit to be disappointed in him. And so, with a clench of his teeth and a hardening of his heart, he circulated his spectre power and leapt ferociously towards the enemy. As someone who wanted to change his fate, if he could not do something small like this, how could he talk about going against the heavens? Perhaps because he was clenching his teeth so hard, his entire mouth was filled with the stench of blood...

D2 abruptly felt a powerful surge of energy rolling over him, and his initially vigorous spiritual power was instantly sent scattering under this force.

He saw his own body start to disappear slowly — not in the white light which marked a departure from the virtual world, but in a gradual dissipation into countless tiny particles of light.

He stared in horror at Li Lanfeng, and with his final bit of consciousness, he croaked out, "Spec..."

After this final utterance, D2's entire being dispersed into the air, instantly vanishing into nothing. At this scene, D3 stumbled a great step backwards in shock and horror. If they had not been invaders and thus were not able to go offline from this Swift Dragon base, they would have definitely chosen to leave this place as soon as they could. This was because, before spectres in the virtual world, they were like a bunch of defenceless children without any ability to fight back.

Ling Lan watched dispassionately as D2 disappeared and then turned to look at D3, asking calmly, "Are you willing to talk? Or perhaps you want to be like him?"

At these words, D3 nodded his head emphatically, showing that he was willing to cooperate. He instinctively looked towards the cultivation area of the T-virus. Due to D2's stalling, he only needed to delay the opponents for another one minute or so and everything would work out. At that time, he would definitely avenge D2.

"Where are you all from?" Ling Lan continued to ask.

D3's gaze flickered and then he answered, "We're from the anti-government freedom army."

"A terrorist organisation?" The corners of Ling Lan's lips curled up in a subtle sneer and she once again gave the kill signal to Li Lanfeng.

D3 shouted out in terror, "I've already answered. Why do you still want to kill me?"

D3's terrified question did not garner Ling Lan's reply. Ling Lan merely flicked her fingers and Li Lanfeng resolutely ran the other over with his spectre power. Swiftly afterwards, D3 followed in D2's footsteps and disappeared from this virtual world. If he were still conscious, he would probably be regretting his decision...

"Is it possible for a small terrorist organisation to have so much financial and material resources and manpower to cultivate such a terrifying virus?" said Ling Lan coldly. Her gaze turned to that hacker who had been cultivating the T-virus. "Tell me, isn't that so?"

That hacker's face paled at these words. He found that this cold youth before him seemed to know everything — it was a suicidal act trying to deceive the other.

"If you know, why aren't you trying to stop it? In another minute, it'll be born. At that time, the virtual world of the Federation will collapse completely. When you all no longer have a centralised command system, you all will not be able to resist our forces..." The hacker finally could not help but blurt out in his shock.

"Hn, you're very honest. I like that very much." Ling Lan nodded and continued, "But how would you know that I didn't stop it?"

Ling Lan's words made the hacker's expression change once more, but he quickly calmed down. He just did not believe that the other would have a way to resolve the virus that even they had no way of controlling ¹.

"From what you've said, it proves that you all are from some other country. I just need to look at which countries' troops are moving unusually in real life and I'll have a list of candidates." Ling Lan could almost guess the truth from what the other had inadvertently revealed. "I know you do not believe what I'm saying, so let's do as you wish and just wait for the rest of the time needed for the virus to form. How much time is needed? One minute, or ten more seconds or so?"

"It's 57 seconds," The hacker blurted out.

"Fine, then I'll give you all those 57 seconds. Let us see whether things will turn out as you all have predicted, that our Federation's virtual world will truly be ruined by that virus," replied Ling Lan evenly.

Seeing Ling Lan's composed attitude, the emotion named panic inevitably rose within the hacker's heart. Did the opponent truly have a solution to this virus? No, they had researched so hard for 16 years before succeeding by chance just once. Even they themselves had not been able to develop a solution — how could the oblivious Huaxia Federation ² have the ability to stop the evolution of the T-virus?

Fifty-seven seconds went by quickly. The T-virus the hackers had been eagerly

anticipating did not bring any effect — the virtual world they were in did not change in any way and was still functioning normally.

That hacker could not help but lunge to stand before the screen of the cultivation area. There, he found that the original flashing codes and the cocoon image which represented the T-virus had already disappeared. The screen was a white blank, as if the T-virus they had cultivated had never existed in the first place.

"What happened? How could the T-virus fail? This is impossible, impossible..." The hacker could not stop himself from shouting. Sixteen years of painstaking research, sixteen years of long days and sleepless nights, and in the end, all of it was but a dream... when they woke up, there was nothing there. He just could not accept it; his emotions were thrust into instant turmoil.

Chapter 338

Confession!

"So worked up? He really won't be a very good source of information then. Since he's useless now, then let's send him off on his final journey," said Ling Lan lightly to Li Lanfeng, turning back to look at him.

Li Lanfeng, who had already killed two people, was rather numb by now. Receiving Ling Lan's order, he did not even stop to think — once more he unleashed his spectre power and obliterated this hacker.

The other hackers saw how cold and ruthless the other side was, clearly showing themselves as the type of people who would kill without batting an eye. In addition, the T-virus they had pinned so much hope on had mysteriously vanished, so their hearts had abruptly lost a major supporting pillar. Consequently, quite a few men actually could not help but slump to the ground.

"Now we can have a proper inquiry. Qi Long, bring the others to me one by one for me to ask them some questions, and then we can compare their answers. Anyone who dares to lie, we'll kill..." Ling Lan's sharp gaze swept over the dozen or so hackers present and gave Qi Long her orders.

Qi Long acknowledged the order and asked the other members of their team to separate the hackers to begin the one-on-one questioning, preventing them from having any chance of colluding. At this time, one of the hackers suddenly turned his head to look at Ling Lan and asked, "If we tell the truth, can you guarantee that we will live?"

These words made the eyes of the remaining hackers light up, and they turned nervously to stare at Ling Lan, anticipating her reply.

Ling Lan glanced coolly at the other and the corners of her lips tilted up slightly. This noncommittal half-smile made these hackers feel a chill permeate their hearts...

Ling Lan tapped her fingers against the armrest. Each tap prompted the hearts of these hackers to jump violently in response, till Ling Lan finally said, "If you all want

to live... that all depends on how you all perform." That said, she did not give the hackers any other chances to speak. With a wave of her right hand, she motioned for Qi Long and the others to continue their questioning.

Seeing Qi Long and the others begin to busy themselves with their assigned task, Li Lanfeng, who was standing beside Ling Lan, did not go over to help. He leaned over and asked Ling Lan quietly, "If they all really speak the truth, are we really going to let them go?"

Ling Lan raised her eyebrows and asked, "What do you think?"

Li Lanfeng frowned and replied, "Letting them go just feels wrong somehow. But we also have no way to keep them here forever..."

Ling Lan pinched her left index finger reflexively with her right hand, her gaze shadowed with deep darkness. In the end, a gleam of ruthlessness flashed through her eyes and she said decisively, "They'll need to remain here forever... I cannot let them take any information about us back with them!" Ling Lan knew well that this decision of hers was extremely harsh and brutal, meaning the end of the lives of these dozen or so people right here. These people might not have done any great harm to the world and were perhaps just common soldiers who were loyal to their home country. However, in order to protect these members who followed her, she could not avoid but be an executioner now.

Ling Lan was well aware that their appearances had been modified by Little Four to look different from their original forms. However, even so, she was not confident that this could withstand the intensive investigation of a nation, or perhaps even that of many nations — there was always the possibility she might miss something. She could not let crisis befall her companions.

Ling Lan's words shook Li Lanfeng badly. He understood what Ling Lan was trying to say — whether or not the other party cooperated, Ling Lan was going to kill them.

Li Lanfeng was a smart person — he instantly understood why Ling Lan had made this decision. They were still a group of cadets. Right now, they were now still extremely weak and vulnerable. Without the protection of the military, if they were discovered by the enemy, their final outcome would inevitably be death. Regardless of which country these people were from, they could not let these people go. Moreover, they also could not take the initiative to request Federation military protection. If the

Federation learned of their existence, especially about him, Li Lanfeng, the government would certainly never allow him to continue living freely on the outside. Spectres were not allowed to be free of the military's control.

Li Lanfeng knew very well that if not for him, Ling Lan could have just reported this matter to the Federation military. The outstanding performance of Ling Lan's team this time would definitely amaze the military; this group of prodigies were sure to shine in the future. Entering the military system early to be given focused cultivation by the military, the futures of Ling Lan's team would only become better and not worse. It could be deduced that Ling Lan had given up on the honours and resources within easy reach, choosing to conceal this matter instead, all because of him, Li Lanfeng.

Li Lanfeng's heart felt a little hot. Looking at the cold as ice and seemingly emotionless Ling Lan who was actually very kind, his heart, which had initially been wavering at the thought of having to kill so many people, became instantly steady. The rabbit was willing to bear this sin for him... then how could he be so weak?

"Leave it to me." The hesitation in Li Lanfeng's gaze was swept away and a savage light silently surfaced within his eyes. He could not let the rabbit's consideration go to waste. In terms of ruthlessness and decisiveness, he was still too far from the rabbit. If he wanted to become a companion who could fight beside the rabbit, he would need to make his heart become much fiercer and harder.

Li Lanfeng's reply made Ling Lan raise her eyebrows, a trace of surprise flashing through her eyes. Ling Lan knew very well that this was Li Lanfeng's first time killing people, because when he had killed the first man, she had clearly seen Li Lanfeng clench his fists tightly, and she had even heard the other bite down so hard that his teeth sounded like they would break.

Ling Lan had thought that Li Lanfeng would need a period of psychological adjustment. Even she herself, when she had killed someone for the first time in the learning space, had almost broken down mentally and had thrown up almost all of her guts...

However, the treatment provided by the learning space was not psychological counselling but endless slaughter. It made you kill until you were numb to it. Every time Ling Lan thought back on this, she could not help but feel some lingering fear and silently rejoice that she had been mentally strong enough, that she had not been driven

insane by the torment.

Ling Lan's initial plan was to let Little Four wrap things up and kill all of these people after she had led the team away from this place. However, when Li Lanfeng had taken the initiative to ask about Ling Lan's plans, an impulse had made Ling Lan admit her real thoughts to the other. She had indeed wanted to see how far the leopard could go. Would he be unable to understand her decision? Or would he refuse to take action out of compassion...

Ling Lan had considered many possibilities, but she had never expected Li Lanfeng to be able to adapt to the psychological pressure of killing so quickly and actually volunteer to execute this task himself. Ling Lan was well aware that Li Lanfeng was speaking honestly. He had instantly abandoned his weakness to become decisive and ruthless. Ling Lan was silently awed by Li Lanfeng's performance; there were indeed those who were born for the darkness — this leopard was truly not a good person...

Even as Ling Lan was silently exclaiming in her heart, she was extremely happy to hand over the task of cleaning up to Li Lanfeng. After all, it was always nice to have someone who was willing to share some of the pressure. Just imagine, taking the lives of so many people at once... even Ling Lan who had been trained by the learning space to be extremely ruthless could not be completely calm.

Very soon, Qi Long and the others brought the confessions of those ten people over. Ling Lan rapidly scanned through the confessions and then pointed out seven of the ten people and said with a cold smile, "Seeking death on your own? That's fine. Leopard, satisfy their wishes."

Having come to a realisation, Li Lanfeng would no longer hesitate. Ling Lan's voice had barely faded when his spectre power poured out and easily erased those seven people. Just like with D2 and D3, they became energy particles of the virtual world.

Seeing how ruthless Ling Lan was — giving a kill order without even asking anything — the remaining few people despaired, no longer holding any wishful hopes of survival.

Ling Lan stared with interest at the faces of the remaining few and then said with a quirk of her lips, "You all still at least said some things that were true, unlike those seven who were spouting complete nonsense. Now, I'll give you all one more chance. I hope that this time, you all won't let me down."

Ling Lan's words caused the despairing eyes of those few people to once again blaze with the desire to live. Being led away for questioning once more, they were extremely cooperative this time, to the extent that they even volunteered some information which Qi Long and the others had not thought to ask for.

By Ling Lan's side, Li Lanfeng asked curiously, "Were all those seven people truly lying?"

Ling Lan replied evenly, "How could that be? It's not like I verified anything... but there is always the need to sacrifice some people to make sure the remaining people no longer dare to conceal anything."

Only then did Li Lanfeng understand that Ling Lan had simply chosen those seven people randomly, using their lives to terrify the remaining survivors into compliance. It could be imagined that the confessions this time would be even more valuable. Li Lanfeng could not help but feel a pang of dejection course through his heart. He had initially been extremely confident in his strategic mind, but it seemed like he was no match for the rabbit in this as well...

The new confessions were out very quickly. Ling Lan browsed through them rapidly and was satisfied. She could already confirm that these people were from the Caesar Empire. Back when she had first heard of the Caesar Empire, she had already felt that this empire was definitely not as friendly as it would seem on the surface. No one would be so magnanimous as to share their spot as hegemon, which was especially true for a nation as strong as the Caesar Empire...

Now, from the looks of it, her first impression had been right. In order to deal with the Huaxia Federation, the Caesar Empire had put in quite a bit of effort. Spending 16 years to successfully cultivate the embryo of a T-virus, they were truly tenacious.

"Who'd have expected it to be Caesar? Many soldiers in our Federation think well of the Caesar Empire. Fighting against the Twilight Empire all these years, Caesar has always supported us on the surface." Han Jijun was the one who had brought the information over. Having looked through this info a step before Ling Lan, he could not help but sigh.

"For a small empire with only 1% of our planetary domain to fight us for so many years is impossible without the backing of these great nations." Ling Lan flicked the papers in her hand and said with a cold smile, "Plus, the profits of war are what these large

nations like to earn most."

Just like those great nations in her previous world, in order to restrain the development of other nations, there were all kind of measures executed both in the open and behind the scenes, such as helping other smaller nations go up against those countries which were rising in power. The methods of the Caesar Empire were truly cut from the same cloth as those great nations back then — as expected of the descendants of one of those great nations.

Han Jijyun dipped his head in deep contemplation at those words. He felt that what Boss Lan said made a lot of sense. Even though the Federation was so powerful and possessed such vast territory, it was still taxing to fight a war on three sides, and this was still with the concerted efforts of the Federation. As far as he knew, the Twilight Empire was not stable internally. It was constantly plagued with civil unrest, so from where did it get the financial and material resources to fight such a long protracted war with the Federation? It stood to reason that there must be other nations involved.

Chapter 339

Flaws!

Han Jijyun thought back on his youth ¹ — every time he heard his father speak of the Twilight Empire, there would always be a sort of banked rage on his father's face. Back then, he had not understood why the Federation was willing to fight such a long protracted war instead of just finishing off those smaller empires... looking back on it now, he had truly been rather naive. This enduring war between the Federation and the Twilight Empire was not purely between the Federation and Twilight — it also involved those great nations hidden behind Twilight...

"How godd*mn despicable!" Having figured things out, Han Jijyun finally could not stop himself from swearing. This caused Qi Long who had come over with him to stare in surprise. He had never expected the typically calm and astute Han Jijyun to ever behave so agitatedly.

In order to salvage the image of his sworn brother in Boss Lan's eyes, Qi Long quickly changed the topic and asked, "Boss, we've already received the answer for the mission. When do we leave?"

They had managed to obtain unexpected information from these people's confessions about why the distress signal sent by the Swift Dragon base at the start had so quickly disappeared.

When the hackers from the Caesar Empire had successfully taken over the Swift Dragon base, they had not accounted for the presence of an NPC senior officer in the base who had actually evolved to have some sense of autonomy. When the hackers managed to replace the mainframe and gained administrative control of the Swift Dragon base, this evolved NPC immediately discovered the discrepancy due to this sense of autonomy. However, as it was only in the early stages of its evolution, it did not know how to act covertly. It had sent a direct distress signal to the mainframe and was instantly discovered by the hackers controlling the base. The hackers had killed the signal as well as the NPC involved.

Still, the mainframe was the mainframe after all. Even though the hackers had successfully infiltrated the Swift Dragon base and perfectly blinded the mainframe's

search, the mainframe had still sensed something off about the situation. That's why it had repeatedly issued the command for the military and even players to go investigate. Due to multiple previous failures with nothing to show for it, the mainframe had upgraded the mission to investigate the Swift Dragon base into an SSS-rank, while dispatching an elite investigative team from the military at the same time...

Coincidentally, Ling Lan had tried to accept a mission to establish her battle clan at this time and just so happened to offend the city lord of Grandsweep City at the same time. The city lord had seen this new SSS-rank mission issued by the mainframe and this had given him the idea of using a large spin wheel. He had hoped to teach Ling Lan a lesson by saddling Ling Lan with this impossible mission. Therefore, there were many reasons which had come together to make it possible for Ling Lan to accept this mission. There was a share of luck and serendipity involved. It's hard to say whether Ling Lan's luck had been amazing or horrible.

Ling Lan had also flipped to the part of the confessions regarding the distress signal by now. She searched through her bag for the mission token and saw that the vivid bright red words displaying the SSS-rank mission had turned orange. Taking it out to take a closer look, a notification entered her mind's eye:

Clan-formation mission, mission ranking: SSS rank. Mission content: A month ago, Fleet Swift Dragon, which is stationed at the Nebula Boundary, sent over an extremely subtle S.O.S... As the message was too brief, the Federation military was unable to determine whether it was a mistake or true request for assistance...

Mission progress: The relevant proof has been obtained. As long as this proof is brought back to Grandsweep City and submitted to the city lord, the mission will be complete. Warning: The person holding the proof must return alive and submit the proof personally to the city lord of Grandsweep City. If the person dies along the way, you will fail the mission!

Receiving direct confirmation from the mission token itself, Ling Lan was very pleased. Hadn't they weathered all the difficulties to come to the Swift Dragon base just for this? They had finally found the answer and could return now.

Ling Lan flicked the confessional papers in her hand in satisfaction and began to consider how they could return to the central district of Mecha World without any fuss. After some thought, she could not help but look in the direction of the investigation team sent by the Federation military which had been ambushed...

She abruptly stood up and commanded, "Let us go!" Since they had already obtained what they wanted, there was no point in staying here any further.

Qi Long and the others acknowledged the order in unison, and Ling Lan walked right out the door without sparing another glance at those bound hackers. It was as if she had forgotten all about them.

Seeing Boss Lan leave without saying what to do with these people, Han Jijyun could not help but frown slightly. However, out of his deep respect towards Ling Lan, he did not say anything and merely followed Ling Lan out the door. Han Jijyun felt that just leaving these hackers like this was not very appropriate, but he could not think of a good solution himself...

Qi Long and the others did not think as much, dutifully following Ling Lan out. Meanwhile, Li Shiyu was the second last to leave. He looked at the last one in the room, Li Lanfeng, and his mouth twitched. He had a vague idea of what the final outcome of these people would be, but he also really did not know what he could say. In the end, he could only let out an almost inaudible sigh before turning on his feet to leave the room.

The remaining seven or eight hackers in the hidden room could not help but feel a surge of happiness when they saw the cold and ruthless lead youth leave the room without giving any orders on dealing with them. But after that, they saw that the final person left in the room with them was that spectre who had already killed so many of their comrades, and their hearts froze up in fear.

One of the hackers seemed to realise something — his expression changed drastically and he screamed shrilly towards the door, "You said that if we told the truth you'd let us go! You're going against your word! Bastard! Demon...!"

His wailing made the others realise what was coming as well. They began to struggle — if their hands and legs had not been tied securely by Qi Long and the others with a special method which could not be unravelled, all of them were likely to have leapt over to attempt a suicidal attack and bring Li Lanfeng down with them. This was because they already knew what the other was planning to do to them; the other had never ever intended to let them live...

Just like that hacker had said, that cold-faced youth was a demon who had crawled out from hell. Not a single person would dare to kill off so many of Caesar's top hackers

just like that — even those great marshals of the Huaxia Federation would have chosen to tolerate this affront, too afraid of war officially breaking out with Caesar to actually give such a ruthless command.

"If you all want someone to blame, then blame your country. Why did it have to turn its greed towards the Huaxia Federation..." Li Lanfeng too understood Caesar's plan. If Ling Lan had not been able to successfully stop the T-virus, their Federation would have descended into a chaotic mess. The flames of war would have spread across the entire planetary sector of the Huaxia Federation, and all its citizens might have become slaves from a dead nation. Li Lanfeng did not really believe that these hackers were truly completely innocent, completely blameless, in all of this. This made his heart incredibly resolute.

And so, amidst their howling cries, Li Lanfeng unleashed the full extent of his spectre powers, obliterating the consciousness of all the remaining hackers. Seeing all of these people's figures become countless white dots slowly dissipating into the virtual world, a petrified expression appeared on Li Lanfeng's face. Despite building himself up in his mind to be cold-blooded and heartless, telling himself he needed to be ruthless and firm, his heart still felt heavy and unanchored after truly killing all these people. It was because this was the first time Li Lanfeng had killed anyone, and he had ended up killing nearly 20 people at that. No matter how determined he was, he still felt a little overwhelmed by such a massive number.

Spectre powers could really kill people invisibly... Li Lanfeng felt as if his two hands were already stained red with a thick coat of blood, unable to be washed clean ever again.

When they heard the screams and wails crying out 'demon' from within the room, the rest of the team who had already walked out the door realised what the outcome of those hackers was. Han Jijyun's expression shifted slightly before settling into calm. Once more, he looked towards Ling Lan at the head of the team, and the heat in his gaze ran even hotter. He found that their Boss Lan had unconsciously become even more formidable — this was not only reflected in terms of capabilities and skills, but was also reflected in terms of mentality.

Han Jijyun knew very well that Ling Lan's decision was absolutely correct. By doing this, he had put a proper end to things, ensuring the team's safety for the future... no one knew they had come here, so the Caesar Empire would never suspect that the ones who had ruined their plans were actually just a bunch of cadets. In contrast, even

though he knew deep down that these people could not be allowed to live, he just could not make the decision to kill all of them.

When Qi Long and Luo Lang heard the shouts of the hackers, they merely pursed their lips heartlessly and thought that those men deserved it. They trusted their boss and also felt that it was not a shame for these people who wanted to invade their Federation to die. Alright, so coming from a military family, they had an innate hatred toward invaders.

Only Xie Yi's and Lin Zhong-qing's pupils contracted sharply when they heard the screams. The two of them shared a look and when they looked back at Ling Lan once more, their admiration carried a kind of fear. It looked like this decision of Ling Lan's had shocked them considerably.

When Li Shiyu heard these cries, his body trembled. Looking at the firm footsteps of Ling Lan walking at the front, he finally could not take it anymore and was about to speak when Chang Xinyuan, who had been observing him closely, stopped him by tugging sharply on his arm. Li Shiyu turned back to look at Chang Xinyuan in confusion, and Chang Xinyuan shook his head firmly.

Li Shiyu clenched his fists and pushed down the compassion in his heart. He reminded himself repeatedly that he could not afford to be soft-hearted — he absolutely could not be soft-hearted... the intelligent Li Shiyu knew rationally that Ling Lan's decision was not wrong, but his heart had still been shaken by those terrible cries.

At this time, he once again recalled his mentor's words, saying that he lacked the heart of a soldier. Back then, he had still been unable to fully understand those words, but now he knew. Compared to these companions, he indeed lacked a soldier's heart. He did not possess the decisiveness and ruthlessness a soldier should have...

"Shiyu, the Li family needs your efforts in the future. I have faith in you but also worry about you. Your heart is too kind. This is both your strength and your weakness..." These words that his eldest cousin brother Li Mulan had said to him from his sickbed rang out once more by his ear, *"One day in future, when you feel that this is your weakness, you must stay by the side of the person who makes you feel that way and learn from the other, until you master what you need to learn."*

So, eldest cousin brother, you had long known what my weakness was. You just could not bear to speak up and hurt my pride, right? And so you had tried to counsel me subtly,

telling me to learn well to get rid of this weakness, right?

Li Shiyu abruptly bowed his head, the sweetness in his heart overlaid with a strong tang of sourness. His eldest cousin brother was wise and astute beyond imagining... was this proof of the saying that ' those who are too insightful are sure to be hurt ² '? So God would not allow this kind of person to exist in the world?

At this thought, Li Shiyu's eyes were suffused with a wave of tenacity and self-confidence. He would definitely get rid of his weakness and then fulfil his heart's desire — he would snatch his eldest cousin brother back from the hands of God! For this objective, he would not falter even if he had to descend into the demonic pits of hell.

Chapter 340

Mutual Destruction!

At the main gates to the warehouse of the secret base, the two Federation hackers who had been impersonating guards by the gates were now slumped on the ground, unmoving, lying in a dark corner not too far from the gates. Meanwhile, Hollow Ground¹, who had been protecting the gates while merged with the darkness, could no longer conceal his figure at this time. He fell over to sit within a dark corner. Under his blurred features, only he knew how tortured his expression was — he had already been holding on for almost two whole hours...

Right then, about 20 to 30 metres away from Hollow Ground, two black-robed figures suddenly emerged from the darkness. Their appearance resembled Hollow Ground's, features blurred out while their entire bodies were swathed in their black robes.

The moment Hollow Ground saw these two appear, he knew that they must be the two spectres he had been battling for close to two hours. Who knew which faction they were from, and why they had infiltrated the Swift Dragon base.

"So this is a top-class spectre from Huaxia..." One of the black-robed figures stared down at Hollow Ground before them and finally said. The other's voice sounded mechanical, harsh and unpleasant. This odd sound was of course due to modification by the other side and was not the other's real voice. For self-protection, spectres would apply comprehensive flawless disguises to themselves.

Hollow Ground did not answer. Right then, his teeth were gritted as he fought back valiantly against the spectre power attacks of the two figures. If this had been a solo operation, upon finding out that he was up against two spectres of equal power as himself, he would definitely have chosen to escape. However, he could not do so now. Not only were there two hackers here, there was still a team of his comrades investigating the secrets of the warehouse behind him. He could not abandon his comrades just for his own survival...

"You still refuse to give up even now. Struggling so hard... you're probably doing this for the men behind you, right?" said one of the black-robed men with a soft sigh, "I can tell you in advance that, just like you, they won't be able to live... there is no so-called

secret inside at all. This is just a trap specially set up for you all."

Hollow Ground jerked his head up at these words, glaring angrily at the two smug spectres with clenched teeth. Frankly, when he had been attacked by the two spectres at the start, he had already had the faint inkling that this was likely a trap meant for them. However, he had still held hope that there might truly be a secret here which necessitated the presence of two guardian spectres.

"You've also reached the end of your rope. Your tenacious spirit is worthy of our respect, which is why we've come out to meet with you now." The tone of the spectre who first spoke was tinged with admiration. "It was our honour to be able to fight against a spectre of your calibre."

The battles between spectres were very brutal. It meant the death of one side or the other, or perhaps even the death of both sides involved. Still, this did not affect their respect and admiration for their opponent. Logically, with Hollow Ground's level of spectre power, he could have at most withstood one hour of their continuous attacks. However, Hollow Ground had obstinately held out for almost double that time. This sort of tenacity and indomitable spirit had earned the admiration of these two spectres.

Frankly, their Caesar Empire had never been able to figure out how some Huaxia Federation soldiers who were obviously not that strong would suddenly break out with combat power multiple times their personal baseline during critical moments. Such as this spectre before them who had managed to hold out for twice the amount of time.

When Hollow Ground heard this, realisation flashed across his eyes. No wonder his opponents had chosen to appear so suddenly before him. His emotions were complicated; in the end, he could only sigh and say, "In the end, I've still lost."

He was well aware that he was at the end of his rope and would not be able to hold out for much longer. In contrast, the other side were still pretty spry as the two men had worked together to attack, each taking some time to rest and recuperate. Hence, their spectre powers were still abundant — the final outcome was clear.

The other black-robed spectre commented with some pity, "From the moment you stepped into the Swift Dragon base, we were destined to fight to the death. If possible, could you tell us your code name?"

"I can't have my name end up as your trophy. I cannot let my country lose face this way." Hollow Ground grinned wryly as he responded. Without showing any outward signs, he compressed all of his remaining spectre power and then unleashed it in one blast towards one of the men. Even if he died, he would pull one of them down with him...

Hollow Ground's spectre power and one of the opponent spectres' power suddenly clashed violently. Although there was nothing visible in the virtual world, one of the black-robed spectres heard a loud explosion right by his ear. The forceful collision of power caused his entire consciousness to shudder, feeling as if it would be sent scattering.

Seeing this, the other black-robed spectre's face paled drastically. He reacted quickly and acted decisively to send his spectre power over to help his companion intercept part of the attack. The two of them had always been partners, so they understood and were well familiar with each other's spectre power. At this most critical moment, he swiftly merged his own spectre power with his companion's, and parried that most intense blow.

The black-robed person who had been caught unprepared by Hollow Ground's spiritual power attack was sent stumbling back three paces to fall over. Seated on the ground, he could not help but throw up a mouthful of blood. Meanwhile, the other black-robed figure was left trembling, his face flushing red and white. However, he soon recovered and seemed to have not taken any damage.

Hollow Ground had made his final attack. Seeing it successfully intercepted by the opponents, he could only glance longingly with regret at this virtual world. His entire body was slowly turning into countless white spots, beginning to drift and scatter apart... perhaps when he had first accepted the mission, he had never expected that he would lose his wings ² here. The only pity was that he actually did not know who was responsible for his death and so could not notify his companions to help take revenge on his behalf.

The two black-robed spectres saw Hollow Ground's figure vanishing completely to become one with the virtual world. Only then did they sigh softly and relax. The injured black-robed person chuckled wryly and said, "Reiter, who knew his death blow would be so powerful? If you hadn't helped me block in time, I would have been injured terribly even if I didn't die."

"Witt, you must have been distracted during our lessons," Reiter could not help but scold when he caught his breath.

"Huh?" Witt turned to look back at his friend in confusion.

"The instructor mentioned very clearly in class that the spectres of other countries all have their own unique characteristics in battle. For the spectres of the Huaxia Federation, we must be especially careful of their final attack right before death. When they have failed, the Federation soldiers are particularly fond of mutual destruction tactics." Reiter recited what the instructor had said back then.

After listening to what Reiter had to say, Witt stuck his tongue out in delayed fear. He had indeed lost focus for a bit during their classes, but he had not expected to miss such an important piece of information ³. This had almost caused him to drink the fruits of regret right here — luckily his partner was on point and had saved his life.

While Reiter had been speaking, he had also used his spectre power to erase the two hackers lying on the ground. Without Hollow Ground's protection, these two unconscious hackers could no longer be saved. Just like Hollow Ground, they turned into white spots which vanished into the air.

In the headquarters of the National Security Agency of the Huaxia Federation, blaring alarms rang out abruptly from within one of the rooms. Complexion draining of colour, the staff member monitoring to one side quickly leapt towards three virtual pods which were flashing with red lights...



"We've finally finished off this spectre. It actually took us close to two hours. How shameful. Witt, quickly rush over to the heart of the secret base now and help Carter's group deal with the spectre there." Reiter had received D1's notification a long while back and knew that the spectre at Carter's side was even stronger than the one here. The two of them were fighting neck-and-neck with the enemy spectre, both sides unable to do anything about the other, locked in a stalemate. Thus, Carter had specially requested Witt's help. If not for the fact that the battle here was also at a critical juncture, Reiter would have long sent Witt over to help.

"D1 has not received any more messages from D2. Carter's side has probably already gotten things under control over there. There's not much point for me to go over there.

I might as well follow you and go handle that team of small fries below." Witt was rather reluctant. He was afraid that he would rush over only to find that Carter and his team had already handled the enemy. Not only would he have travelled all that way for nothing, he would not even obtain any of the battle merits on this end.

Reiter glared at him in exasperation and scolded, "Asshole, go if I tell you to go. What are you blathering on about?" Seeing the obvious reluctance on Witt's face, Reiter's heart abruptly softened and he said, "Don't worry, if there's nothing for you to do there, I'll share half of the merits I earn here with you."

Reiter naturally knew what Witt was worried about, so he shared his plans directly to assure the other. The team below had no spectres protecting them, so no matter how good they were at fighting, there were still like defenceless babes in his eyes. They were like lambs for the slaughter, not posing any difficulty at all for him as a spectre — he did not mind sharing this kind of effortless battle merits with his partner.

"Reiter, you're the one who said it. Don't you dare go back on your word later! I'll go immediately," said Witt happily. Without waiting for Reiter to respond, he disappeared into the darkness of the night, zooming towards the heart of the secret base. Although they could move through the skies and the earth in the virtual world like gods, moving much more rapidly than normal people, it was instinctive for them to move in the cover of shadows.

Reiter saw Witt rushing off impatiently and could only shake his head helplessly. Witt's personality was still a touch too impetuous, but he was still young. With a few more years of instruction, all of this would no longer be a problem. Subsequently, he entered the gates, tracking the path taken by the investigation team of the Huaxia Federation...

He needed to finish off these people before Carter's side wiped out those invaders on their end, otherwise he would become the butt of their jokes. Having designed such a perfect trap and still needing so much time to finish off these people — if word got out about this, he wouldn't be able to show his face ⁴...



Ling Lan had not walked very far with the rest of the team when Li Lanfeng caught up to rejoin them. Ling Lan swept a glance over Li Lanfeng — although his complexion was a little pale, his expression was composed and steady. Ling Lan knew that the

leopard would be able to overcome this hurdle with his own strength. She felt extremely relieved inside and no longer worried over the matter.

When Ling Lan's team had entered the secret base, due to the continuous battles they had to fight, it took about one and a half hours for them to reach their destination. On their way out, even though there were still quite a lot of soldiers in their way, because the soldiers' combat power was considerably worse than Ling Lan's team's, the return journey did not take them as long. They were back at the mouth to the tunnel in less than 20 minutes.

Chapter 341

The Sleeping Baby!

At this time, Little Four who had left Ling Lan to go wipe out the T-virus returned, suddenly appearing within Ling Lan's mindspace.

Ling Lan saw Little Four's reappearance and knew that he must have finished clearing out the T-virus. Still, the potential harm the T-virus could inflict on the Federation's virtual world was too great, so Ling Lan could not help but ask, "Have you cleared out that T-virus, that Doomsday Flower?"

Little Four grinned widely, nodded and said, "Yup yup, all done."

"You're sure that the T-virus won't appear again in the virtual world?" Ling Lan asked again, still worried.

"Yup yup, as long as Boss does not want to see it, the T-virus will not appear here." Little Four blinked his clear black eyes guilelessly and replied with a sure expression.

Only then did Ling Lan relax. She did not notice when Little Four bowed his head to hide a smile.

Of course Little Four would smile sneakily — he had only said that the T-virus would not appear again if Ling Lan did not want to see it. If Ling Lan wanted to see it again one day, the T-virus could appear any time she wanted it to...

That's right. He, Little Four, had transferred that T-virus, a.k.a. the Doomsday Flower, into the learning space for focused cultivation. Little Four felt that there was no such thing as good or bad when it came to viruses. It all depended on who the user was. Besides, it wasn't easy for him to see something related to the Mandora star system — Little Four could not bear to erase it just like that...

Mind you, the instructors in the learning space were unwilling to talk to him much due to his young age, and Ling Lan had so much to do in her daily life that she did not talk to him very often either. Meanwhile, in the virtual world, other than that little optical supercomputer on that spaceship, he still had not encountered another self-aware

intelligence entity in this entire virtual world... yes, Little Four was feeling lonely.

Little Four left Ling Lan's mindspace excitedly to come to a sealed space within the learning space in the next second. There, a baby was sleeping deeply suspended in the air. The baby's body was connected to countless white and black lines whose ends disappeared into the endless darkness of this space. There was no visible end point.

Little Four's figure flashed once more and he was right by the baby's side in the air. He curiously reached out a finger to touch the other's soft cheek. Disturbed, the little baby's pretty brow scrunched up, and its bright red, little lips pouted angrily. It looked like he hated having his sleep disturbed by others.

"Little fellow, sleeping like a dead pig. Being able to continue living, you need to thank your Elder Brother Little Four, you know? Yup, I was the one who saved you, so I should be the one to name you. What should I call you? Little Doom? Little World? ¹ Nope, Little World sounds too much like my name Little Four ². That name was given to me by Boss. It's my exclusive title!" said Little Four, riled up. His eyes spun and then with a trace of cheekiness he said, "I've decided. I'll call you Little Blossom ³... Little Blossom, you need to grow up quickly and wake up. Stick around with me later on and I guarantee you'll be treated well. Remember that I'm your big brother in the future. You must call me Big Bro Little Four later on!" announced Little Four gleefully.

The sleeping baby did not know then that even before he had woken up, he had already been given an extremely lame name by the naughty Little Four. Only when he grew up did he learn how horrible this name was and lodged a firm protest with Boss Lan. Only then did he manage to retrieve his dignity and gain a new name.

Little Four looked at the sleeping baby, his mood buoyant. He nodded happily, knowing that he would have a friend in the future...

Little Four was lost in the wonderful daydreams of his beautiful future when he suddenly raised his head and frowned. At that instant, he had sensed a spectre that should have been at the trap rapidly approaching his boss's location.

Little Four's figure flickered and he instantly returned to Ling Lan's mindspace to immediately report his findings to Ling Lan.

After finding out, without even having to think about it, Ling Lan sent Little Four out to kill that person. After killing more than a dozen people, Li Lanfeng was drained in

both mental energy and spectre power. Ling Lan did not want to tire him out any further and risk unnecessary complications.

Witt, who was hurrying over, suddenly felt a chill run through his body. And then, an overwhelming cascade of familiar yet horrifying spectre power rolled over him. Despite his fast reflexes, allowing him to speedily whip out his own spectre power to defend himself, the power gap between the two was just too wide. His defence only made that wave of energy pause for a brief moment, and then his consciousness was crushed beneath it.

He seemed to feel his soul splitting apart, and then his vision blacked out and he was no longer aware of anything. He had no chance to see his own body slowly becoming white dots to disappear from this virtual world, just like Hollow Ground.

Meanwhile, somewhere else, the spectre Reiter who was calmly approaching his target, the investigation team, suddenly found his own spectre power vibrating violently. This was a warning sign. He stopped abruptly and after using spectre power to protect himself, he began to test his surroundings. He found nothing, however. Puzzled, he shook his head and could only continue to move forwards, but his demeanour was obviously much more cautious than before.

When Little Four reported back to Ling Lan that he had already handled that spectre, Ling Lan's team had already arrived at the exit.

Ling Lan swept a glance over all her team members and then took out that confession from her bag, intending to pass it to Li Lanfeng. "Leopard, safeguard this data. Remember, you absolutely cannot die this whole trip back. You must live to hand this over to the city lord of Grandsweep City, or else the mission will fail."

Li Lanfeng was taken aback by these words. He did not expect Ling Lan to choose him to shoulder this great responsibility. From the very start of the planning of this strategy, it was clear how important this role was. Li Lanfeng had always thought that this role was certain to be for Qi Long or Luo Lang, because they were the second and third strongest respectively in the team. At the same time, they were also childhood companions of the rabbit, so in terms of trustworthiness, they should be at the top of the list.

But now, this task had been entrusted to him. Li Lanfeng could feel the full extent of the rabbit's trust in him. This moved him greatly. He secretly took a deep breath and

then very calmly reached out a hand to accept the data file. Li Lanfeng was now certain that his importance was definitely not much lesser than that of Qi Long, Luo Lang, and the others in the rabbit's heart. He must live up to the rabbit's feelings for him.

Frankly, Li Lanfeng was overthinking things. Ling Lan had chosen Li Lanfeng because she felt that he was a crafty person with a scheming mind and a bellyful of murky water. Furthermore, his mecha control skills were as good as Qi Long's. No matter how you looked at it, he was from the stock of scourges whose misdeeds lasted for thousands of years ⁴. She believed that even when it was 'game over' for the rest of the team, Li Lanfeng would still be able to live on with vim and vigour ⁵. However, this still indirectly displayed Ling Lan's great faith in the leopard — Li Lanfeng had not been moved for nothing.

Ling Lan then turned to look at Qi Long and instructed seriously, "Qi Long, after this, you lead the team members to provide full protection to the leopard. Even if you all die in battle, you cannot let the leopard die."

Qi Long's expression turned solemn. "Yes, Boss!" Qi Long and the others knew very well that the true challenge would only start after this.

"After that, we will move as planned. We will split our forces in two." As Ling Lan signalled with her gaze for her team to move out, she also instructed Little Four within the mindscape, *"Carry out the original plan."*

Receiving his orders, Little Four immediately rubbed his palms together and got to work. Killing spectres had only been a temporary job — now, it was finally time for him, Little Four, to really showcase his skills.



In one of the dormitories of the makeshift camp accommodating the survivors of the Jinglong mainship, a soldier was constantly looking at the communicator in his hands. Suddenly, an expression of pleasant surprise appeared on his face and he quickly lifted his head to meet the nervous expression of the companions by his side and said, "There's news! The commanding officer has succeeded on their end and has asked us to start moving to take control of the military ship and wait for their return."

At these words, a member of the group who looked to be the leader immediately nodded his head and gave the order. "Good, then let's start acting according to the

original plan."

These people immediately sorted out their weapons and quietly left the camp grounds, sneaking their way towards the spaceport of the military vessel. Their objective had been determined early on — the patrol ship which had brought them here in the first place. According to their plan, when the commanding officers came back, they would also sneak into this military vessel, and before anyone in the Swift Dragon base discovered them, they would start the ship and leave this place.

Ling Lan, who had long sussed out their plan, decided to take advantage of the situation and let her team sneak onto the ship in question as well. This way, with these people from the military as their shields, no one would discover their movements.

Qi Long and the others soon left the canteen — they had to rely on themselves after this. Ling Lan watched them leave and sighed softly. A data file suddenly appeared in her hands — it was that confession she had given Li Lanfeng.

The almighty Little Four had already made a perfect copy of the document. Ling Lan would not put all her eggs in one basket — she had entrusted Li Lanfeng with a copy but had also kept a copy for herself. As long as one of them stayed alive, this mission could be completed. This way of doing things was actually against the rules, but with Little Four making adjustments behind the scenes, everything became reasonable and acceptable.

Ling Lan once again kept the document away. She had divided their forces for two reasons. One, she wanted to completely eliminate the hidden threat. She could not let any of the people from the Caesar Empire who had infiltrated the base go, because she could not let any hidden dangers that could threaten her team members in any way to remain. Two, she needed to rescue those Federation investigation team soldiers who were entrenched in trouble. She still needed to use them as shields to deflect attention from her team.

Little Four simulated the commanding officer's communication signal, and after relaying news to those people holding the fort back in the camp, he left Ling Lan to go kill off those hackers hiding in the command centre.

In the meantime, with Little Four providing cover, Ling Lan made her way to the warehouse at top speed. Although there was still one spectre there, having figured out how to control her spiritual power, Ling Lan had the ability to protect herself.

Therefore, she was not afraid, and this was also why Little Four felt reassured enough to leave his boss.

In a hidden room of the command centre, 8 black-robed hackers were staring at the time on the screen before them with ashen faces. The initial estimated time for the successful activation of the T-virus had already exceeded 20 minutes — they had already made the preparations to celebrate their triumph, but reality had intruded to slap them in the face. The virtual world of the Federation was still operating normally with no sign at all of anything wrong.

Chapter 342

Mutated Spiritual Self!

D1 and the others were not just sitting around idly. They had been constantly trying to contact D2 and D3 inside the secret base but were unsuccessful till the very end. Despite the good news coming again and again from the warehouse, their mood was steadily becoming worse.

They already had a vague sense that something was wrong — it was likely that an incident had occurred at the secret base. Every time they considered this possibility, their hearts were filled with regret — why had they been so preoccupied with the victory at hand that they had not immediately transferred the spectres on the other end over to help when D2 had requested assistance?

They were even more frustrated and hateful that the Federation army had played a good move by using diversionary tactics to split their forces, destroying their initial sure-win scenario.

"Say, do you think something happened to D2 and D3?" asked the youngest in the group, D10, unable to bear the depressed atmosphere.

The only response he received, however, was silence. Seeing everyone's mood becoming worse and worse, D1 rallied his spirits and retorted loudly, "Impossible! We just talked to them half an hour ago. D2 said everything was normal then, that the invaders had been successfully intercepted by the mecha teams, while Carter and Pete had also gained the upper hand."

"Then why hasn't the T-virus broken out yet?" D10 finally voiced the question in everyone's hearts. According to D2's report half an hour ago, the T-virus should have already erupted 20 minutes ago. Why was there still no sign of it now?

D10's words caused D1 to fall silent again for a few seconds before he opened his mouth again to rasp hoarsely, "Perhaps, some mutation occurred when the T-virus broke out. After all, we have only succeeded once. No one knows what kind of situation might turn up during its complete formation. Or perhaps the virus has a certain incubation period after breaking out and will not immediately manifest itself..."

D1's words caused the others to take heart — indeed, just because there was no sign now did not necessarily mean they had failed. They might as well continue trying to establish contact with the secret base. Perhaps they would be able to get in touch with the people there right in the very next second and obtain some great news. Who knew?

Seeing everyone cheered up, D1's mood lifted a little as well. He continued to say, "Just now, I've contacted Reiter. He said he has already sent Witt over. With that, we should find out very soon what has happened on D2's end, and why we suddenly lost contact."

After all, this was not their own country's virtual network. As intruders, there was just no way for them to take complete control. Almost every day, there was the risk of them losing contact amongst their separated groups. It was just that the disconnect had never lasted so long before, previously lasting for at most a few short minutes. D1 reflexively glanced at the procedural activation key he had pre-programmed. He really hoped he would not have to use it...

Their hopes rekindled, D1's group continued to try and find out what was going on with the secret base but they still failed. Not long after, they felt a horrifying wave of energy suddenly descend on their heads. Before they could react to it, that wave of energy had crashed down mercilessly.

When D1 sensed that energy wave, his face changed drastically, and he exclaimed in shock, "Spectre... this cannot be!"

D1 initially thought that the Huaxia Federation had only sent one spectre this time, so they had purposefully lured that spectre and the Federation investigative team to the trap they had set up in advance. After that, they deployed two spectres of their own with the focused task of intercepting and killing that spectre.

When they had seen the other party walking into their trap without suspecting a thing, D1 and the others had barely had any time to rejoice when they had received D2's urgent notification. They found out that the secret base had been invaded by another unidentified team and there was another powerful spectre with the invaders. This fact had soured D1's mood greatly — he had not expected flaws to actually appear in such a foolproof plan as theirs.

However, D1 had not been too concerned. To ensure the security of the secret base, he had kept two spectres there to hold the fort. D1 felt that it should definitely be no problem for two spectres to handle just one enemy spectre.

That's right. This time, in order to ensure the success of project-T, the Caesar Empire had not only dispatched 30 top-class hackers, they had also generously sent four top-class spectres to handle that spectre the Huaxia Federation would send.

D1's planning was actually ideal. Both spots had two spectres in place — they would definitely be able to kill off the two spectres the Federation had sent. What he had never imagined was that they would succeed at the trap but for the secret base area to end up in a deadlock. In this situation where they had the great advantage of 2 versus 1, it was unexpected for the other to be able to hold them off and hold them at a deadlock. It was even more unexpected that he had actually lost contact with D2 and D3 at the last minute.

Frankly, he had already sensed that something was not right, but he also did not want to think or admit that they might fail. Deep down, he still hoped that everything was progressing as planned at the secret base, that this was just normal connection failure and that no accidents had occurred. However, when this great wave of spectre power emerged, D1 knew then that the secret base must be finished.

D1 was not just a simple hacker — at the same time, he had also awakened spectre powers. However, he had chosen to develop his hacker powers because he did not want to lose his freedom. Perhaps he was naturally extraordinarily gifted — his spectre power did not stop evolving despite his choice. He had achieved breakthroughs twice on that end, advancing to advanced level, only one step away from becoming a top-class spectre.

This had always been his secret. He knew that if the Empire military ever found out, he would definitely lose his freedom to become an experimental subject. Therefore, he had always sealed his spectre power away, only revealing his superior hacker abilities.

This was why D1 had still been able to speak even under the wave of horrifying spectre power. Due to the seal, he had a certain degree of resistance against spectre power attacks.

Still, even so, D1 could not escape this full-powered attack of Little Four's. D1 knew very well that under this horrifying spectre power, his spectre power could only provide some instinctive protection for a moment. Soon, just as if surrendering to one's own king, it would automatically release its defence to welcome death.

Inspiration sparked through D1's mind and he instantly realised that this spectre power was definitely not any so-called top-class existence but an existence that had gone beyond top-class. It was perhaps at the rumoured spectre king level, or perhaps even at the level of spectre god which had never before appeared in the virtual world... These hypothetical types of existences had been mentioned in some of the research books he had read back when he had been studying about spectres.

D1 watched helplessly as his group D members became white dots and vanished from the virtual world. If not for his spectre powers providing some instinctual token defence, he would probably have already disappeared without a trace like his other companions by now. But even so, he knew he did not have much time left. He saw his own two feet begin to fade away into white spots to vanish into the air...

"Are you a spectre king, or a spectre god?" asked D1 fearlessly. The black robe concealing his figure had already been stripped away by that horrific wave of spectre power, revealing his original appearance. He was about 24 to 25 years old with handsome features, golden hair, sapphire-blue eyes, and sharply-defined features. These were all characteristics of Caesarians ¹...

"Eh? Actually still alive?" Little Four, who had initially assumed the sure-death of everyone with one strike, could not help but exclaim at seeing one of his targets still alive. The next second, Little Four appeared before the eyes of D1. The appearance of Little Four, who looked just like a 5 to 6-year-old boy ² with a little pigtail braid sticking up from his head along with a chubby little figure and short limbs, made D1 stare at him in disbelief.

"How could the Huaxia Federation have a being like you?" It was obvious at a glance that Little Four was a Huaxian ³. Although D1 knew that the one who had attacked them must be a spectre from the Huaxia Federation, he was dumbfounded upon seeing Little Four's childish appearance, unable to comprehend the situation. This was because at Little Four's apparent age, even the most talented spectre would have only be at the stage of awakening. Typically, a newly awakened spectre could only be at a trainee level — being able to advance straight into lower level would already mark one as an extremely aberrant existence, while advancing to intermediate level would mark the possibility of one being a spectre king...

But no matter how aberrant a child was, it was impossible for one to immediately step into spectre king realm. D1 smiled bitterly — could it be that the Huaxians' luck was not yet at an end, which was why they could be so lucky as to possess this kind of

natural king? D1 could only think so in the end.

Little Four did not answer D1. He only prodded D1's body and obtained the other's data. "You're so strange. Actually having both hacker power and spectre power existing within you at the same time, with both powers achieving quite a high level." Little Four naturally knew that the coexistence of spectre power and hacker power in this world was forbidden territory.

"I don't know why either." Seeing Little Four acting like a little grown up, D1 found the situation hilarious and actually broke out into laughter. Perhaps knowing he was going to die soon, D1 no longer suppressed himself. He might as well be himself without any restraints and laugh if he felt like laughing...

"Hmm, there is a need for research." Little Four looked at D1 and perhaps the other's handsome appearance gave Little Four a favourable impression, for Little Four instantly came to a decision. Little Four reached out a firm little hand towards D1's brain.

D1 stared in stunned astonishment as Little Four's hands sunk into his brain, and then he felt his soul being grabbed. It was as if his soul was being forcibly extracted from his body, or perhaps like his body was being torn apart...

"Ah...!" The intense pain made D1 scream involuntarily, his entire body beginning to shake violently.

However, the agony made his mind extremely clear. In his mind, he had thousands of questions — what was this child planning to do to him? Why did he hurt so badly? Why could the other's hand sink into his brain like this... but he would not have the chance to ask these questions. By the time Little Four's hand pulled back from his brain, D1 had lost consciousness, falling into darkness. His entire body suddenly shattered with a cracking sound, turning into countless white dots to disappear into the air.

All of Little Four's attention was on his right hand. He did not notice the little finger of D1's right hand twitching right before D1 lost consciousness. Somewhere in the distance, a hidden installation silently activated.

Little Four opened his right hand. In his palm was a bundle of pure energy, shining with an indistinct white light. Little Four studied it closely and very quickly found that

within the white-coloured light, there were several strands of gold that were easily overlooked, much finer than silk threads...

"Yup, as expected, his spiritual self is really rather abnormal. Looks like before Little Blossom wakes up, I won't be that bored anymore." The corners of Little Four's lips curled upwards involuntarily, his eyebrows bowed in a happy curve. It looked like he was in a great mood. "Consider yourself lucky, meeting me, Little Four, in a good mood, giving yourself a chance to live..."

As he muttered to himself, Little Four pressed that spiritual self onto his body, where it was then absorbed by Little Four to disappear without a trace.

Chapter 343

Use!

Perhaps Little Four was very happy with the day's harvest, or perhaps Little Four wanted to rush back to help his boss earlier... in any case, he did not check the scene properly before hurriedly leaving the scene. He did not discover a hidden secret command being successfully transmitted.

Right then, Ling Lan had already rushed to the warehouse doors. Along the way, she had moved according to the route that a clone of Little Four had plotted out for her, making her way unimpeded to her destination.

"After this, there are still several traps, but the Federation investigation team has already destroyed them. We can just move ahead at full speed. One more thing. One of the enemy spectres is already close to the investigation team." Little Four's clone, who had initially been reporting coordinates and real-time situations suddenly became talkative.

Ling Lan calmly raised a brow. "Little Four, you're back?"

In the mindspace, Little Four's initially robotic expression collapsed and he said sullenly, "Boss, how did you know?"

Little Four had deliberately kept quiet when he had returned, wanting to see when Boss would notice he had come back. He did not expect to be caught out the moment he opened his mouth. This made Little Four feel very hurt.

"Your clone doesn't say any nonsense," Ling Lan responded evenly. Although Little Four had many clones, his clones were all very mechanical. They were like programmes with specific settings, meticulously carrying out their tasks. Only Little Four's true body would possess strong emotions which were very obviously reflected in his tone of speech.

Ling Lan's words dealt a double blow to Little Four. So it turned out his clones were that lame — from tomorrow onwards, he must improve his clones' intelligence...

"Finished off all those people?" Ling Lan asked Little Four as she continued to move forwards at high speed.

At this question, Little Four was instantly revived in full spirits. He lifted a victory 'V' sign up high and said excitedly, "Of course, with me, Little Four, in charge, success is naturally guaranteed."

"Found nothing unusual?" Little Four was often careless, so Ling Lan could not help but check with him again.

Little Four thought of that spiritual entity he had put in a secret room in preparation for research and wondered whether that was considered something unusual. However, since Boss had asked him to erase everyone, that spiritual self he had extracted should be his spoils of victory... it should be fine not to tell Boss about it. Little Four hesitated for a moment but eventually decided that he would report to Boss after his research bore some fruit. Besides, he had already defied his boss in secret so many times already — one more time wouldn't hurt.

Thus, Little Four decisively shook his head and said, "Nothing unusual."

Ling Lan trusted Little Four very much. Thus, hearing Little Four say so, she did not inquire further. Ling Lan knew that time was tight — since Little Four was already back, she immediately headed deeper into the warehouse at her greatest speed. In other words, she was charging towards the troubled investigation team.

All the way, not a single NPC soldier showed up to intercept her. There were countless corpses lying beside each checkpoint — it looked like the investigation team was very thorough, making sure not to leave any loose ends, which saved Ling Lan quite a bit of trouble.

When they had two checkpoints left to go, Little Four suddenly reminded, "Boss, the spectre has already met up with the team. It looks like he is about to begin attacking them. Do you want me to immediately go over and kill the enemy?"

Ling Lan's footsteps paused abruptly but instantly resumed again. Maintaining her original speed, she continued moving towards the two parties. She was silent for about 20 seconds before responding, "No need. Wait for me to arrive at the destination, then we'll see."

Indeed. If Little Four took action, they could indeed easily rescue all these people, but

how would they explain things after rescuing them? Little Four's actions would undoubtedly tell the investigation team that there was still an unidentified third party at work in the Swift Dragon base. They would definitely report this to military headquarters when they returned, and even if they knew that the third party were allies and not enemies, the Federation military would still want to investigate things thoroughly.

Ling Lan did not have the confidence to keep everything under wraps in the face of a full-force investigation by the military. Moreover, she also did not trust the mainframe of Mecha World. If the Federation military tried to obtain information from it, the mainframe might just hand over their mission details to the military...

Well, even if the Federation military discovered anything, it would not be a big deal. Ling Lan believed that her father Ling Xiao would definitely suppress the matter — he would never allow the military to disrupt their regular military academy life. Still, Ling Lan was afraid that the traitor lurking within the higher levels of the military administration would leak their information to the Caesar Empire. The set-up which had trapped Ling Xiao those many years ago had let Ling Xiao confirm that there was a traitor within military headquarters. On this, Ling Lan agreed whole-heartedly.

If Caesar really learned of their involvement, she and her companions would definitely be swept into an endless chain of threats and attempts on their lives. Caesar would definitely never let them go for destroying the perfect set-up they had painstakingly arranged over the span of a whole 16 years. Just imagine. If it had not been for Ling Lan's group, Caesar would have already obtained the fruits of success.

Ling Lan had indeed rushed over with the intent of rescuing these Federation soldiers, because Ling Lan had been using them from the start.

The moment Ling Lan had arrived at the Swift Dragon base, she had already asked Little Four to comprehend the full situation at the base. They had discovered that there was a bunch of people from a powerful but unidentified faction within the base, who had successfully replaced the mainframe in taking control of the highest clearance command rights of the Swift Dragon base. In other words, the Swift Dragon base was an NPC base controlled by the mainframe in name only. In fact, these NPCs were now already subordinates of the opponent; the mainframe's authority had been superseded.

Meanwhile, Little Four had also discovered five spectres lurking within the base.

Among them, one was part of the investigation team sent by military headquarters, while there were as many as four from the unidentified faction. This situation as reported by Little Four had made Ling Lan's heart heavy with worry. The presence of spectres meant that their mission this time had become extremely dangerous — any unfortunate slip might result in them losing their lives. Even though she had Little Four, this nature-defying protective talisman, around, she still could not dare to guarantee she would be able to protect all her team members flawlessly.

Spectres were known as 'death gods' in the virtual world. Their abilities indeed defied nature and were terrifying. Any bit of negligence and you would be caught — they could instantly destroy a player's brain region. Those who were turned into idiots but kept their lives could still be considered lucky; many more would be directly reduced to brain-dead vegetables with no hope of waking up again for the rest of their lives.

So, despite having located their secret base on the first day, Ling Lan had not dared to act impetuously. Four spectres and close to thirty top-class hackers. Even though Little Four had assured her that it was no problem, Ling Lan still did not dare to take risks with the lives of her team members.

Even if Ling Lan had no other strengths, patience was her most prominent character strength. Without full confidence to ensure safety, Ling Lan would strongly suppress the urge to act and pretend she knew nothing. Thus, she had calmly waited at the Swift Dragon base for several days.

Until tonight, when the opportunity finally came. The investigation team the Federation military had sent finally could not restrain themselves any longer and had prepared a night-time excursion to investigate. At first, Ling Lan thought the investigative team would be choosing to enter the secret base her team had found. But unexpectedly, the other team had been successfully lured away by the enemy to a different location, which was the warehouse base that Little Four had long discovered was a trap.

Ling Lan knew that if these people fell for the trap, it would be hard to say what the outcome would be. Over there, there had been more than ten top-class hackers monitoring the area comprehensively, and three strong and powerful mecha warriors and two spectres waiting on full alert. The moment the unwitting investigation team was ambushed, they would have been likely to be completely wiped out. Back then, Ling Lan had had the impulse to go inform the other, but in the end, Ling Lan calmed herself down. She chose the cold-blooded option of observing from the side-lines,

because she needed to take responsibility for the safety of her companions.

Despite her rational decision, Ling Lan still felt a little guilty with regards to these soldiers. Thus, once she had finished her own mission, she decided to rush over to rescue them out. Of course, another main reason for this was that she still needed the team to be her team's shields.

Still, rescuing these people needed to be done under the precondition that her team would not be exposed. If rescuing the other team would increase the danger to her own team, Ling Lan would absolutely choose to continue observing from the side-lines. This was why when Little Four suggested she go ahead first to kill the enemy and save the team, Ling Lan had coldly rejected the proposal.

Ling Lan pushed her speed to the limit. It had to be said that the virtual world of this world had been simulated to be as realistic as possible, faithfully reflecting real-world physiques inside the virtual world. Ling Lan's strength at a half step to Domain let her move through the virtual world like the wind. Leaving behind but a fleeting shadow, she had disappeared from sight.

About 40 seconds later, Ling Lan silently arrived at the ambush point. Although the opponent had a number of hackers comprehensively monitoring each corner, with Little Four's cover, Ling Lan naturally would not be discovered.

Ling Lan was very surprised; only the three guarding the door were dead. The other people were all still alive and accounted for, but their situation was bad. Every one of them had been isolated and surrounded by enemies. Ling Lan quickly understood the enemies' intent. They had not chosen to kill the team because they were waiting for their spectre to come erase the men directly. The people from the Caesar Empire were similarly afraid that when these people died in the virtual world and reappeared at a resurrection point, they would report to the Huaxia Federation and give the Federation time to prepare.

When the investigation team of the Federation saw the enemy's spectre appear, they understood what the enemy was planning. Several warriors tried to kill themselves but were stopped by the enemies surrounding them. They had no chance to commit suicide even if they wanted to now.

Seeing this, the commanding officer grimaced. "We've been tricked. Still, I cannot understand, Whether or not we get resurrected, it will still expose the fact that

something has gone wrong at the Swift Dragon base. At most, you all can only delay things for several days." The moment they died, it would prove that the Swift Dragon base had been invaded by some unidentified faction with spectres in tow. This was because only spectres could obliterate a player's brain. The military would definitely dispatch countless spectres over at first notice to hunt and kill these invaders, unless the enemy managed to completely retreat from the base over the next few days.

"Just a delay of a few days will be enough. One more thing — preventing your suicides is not because we're afraid of you all going back to report. All your resurrection points have already been set to the Swift Dragon base anyway. We just don't want to bother with the time and effort needed to go erase you all at the resurrection point." Reiter laughed when he heard what the commander had to say, following up with an explanation as to why they had prevented the other from killing themselves.

The commanding officer's expression changed at these words and he quickly looked up the relevant details. Sure enough, a few days ago, when they had first landed at the Swift Dragon base, the system had sent a notification telling them that their resurrection point had automatically been changed to the Swift Dragon base. In other words, even if they had committed suicide, they would still be unable to return to Mecha World's central district. They would still be resurrected here in the Swift Dragon base.

Chapter 344

Rest In Peace!

The commanding officer knew very well that in Mecha World, there was no login point at the Swift Dragon base. In other words, as long as they were still in the Swift Dragon base, they would have no way at all of leaving the virtual world, let alone report to military headquarters. It looked the other's true intention was indeed not to stop them from reporting but to kill off all of them.

"You all are going too far," said the commanding officer through gritted teeth. He knew that the odds were truly stacked against their side this time — their only hope was that the enemy only had one spectre...

Reiter did not get angry in response; they had planned to turn the Huaxia Federation upside down to begin with. Right then, he was still preoccupied with thoughts of the secret base. After all, it was already time for the T-virus to break out yet there was still no unusual signs. This made him rather anxious. Thus, he did not want to speak any further with this commanding officer of the Federation. Circulating his spectre power, he poured it out in a torrent at the other...

Seeing that things were going south, the commanding officer quickly shared a look with an extremely plain-looking warrior, and then the two of them leapt up. One of them spun into a whirlwind sidekick, while the other let go a flurry of kicks in the air, and they actually managed to send the people surrounding them flying. The next second, they came to the side of an army clerk who had been taking notes all the way and did not seem like he had a lot of combat power and took up protective stances on both sides of him.

In a world invisible to normal humans, two powerful forces collided forcefully. The bodies of Reiter and that clerk shuddered in unison.

Reiter's expression changed. "Spectre." Who would have expected that there would still be another spectre in hiding within the Huaxia Federation team? If he had not arrived in time, the people ambushing on their own side might have been in danger.

The clerk said nothing, only staring coldly back at Reiter. From their one clash, he had

understood that the other's spectre power was probably stronger than his by a hair. A trace of regret flashed across his eyes. If he had known the other side had spectres, he would have long killed off all these enemies when they had surrounded his team. In order to figure out the backgrounds of the enemy, they had chosen to tolerate and hold back temporarily. But from the looks of it now, that had been a huge miscalculation.

For the mission this time, in order to guarantee success, military headquarters had sent two spectres on the mission, one overtly, the other covertly. The exposed spectre was Hollow Ground, while the hidden spectre was him, impersonating an army clerk among the investigation team. With the exception of the commanding officer and his adjutant, no one else, not even Hollow Ground, knew of his true identity.

The reason he had been tasked as the hidden spectre was that his spectre powers were rather unique and special. As long as he did not use his spectre power, his entire aura would be just like a regular person's — no one would sense anything strange about him. It should be known that all spectres carried a trace of danger on their aura to some extent. Spectres were extremely sensitive to this trace on the auras of other spectres, so the moment another spectre came within the range of their senses, they would very quickly detect the presence of kin. This special trait of his allowed him to play the role of hidden spectre on many a mission, and this time was no exception.

Thus, when they discovered the enemy was a spectre, the commanding officer and his adjutant had quickly rushed to the hidden spectre's side. Indeed, his spectre power was still pretty decent, but his physical attack capabilities were just like other spectres — terrible.

"I just want to know... what has happened to our people at the gates?" asked the clerk hoarsely, a hand pressed to his chest, trying to calm the roiling blood and qi within it. Seeing the other rush in from the outside, he already had an inkling that something had gone wrong. Hollow Ground was most likely in trouble, but he still hoped that Hollow Ground was safe and had not died in battle.

Reiter chuckled in response and said, "Since I'm here, what do you think happened to those comrades of yours?"

The clerk's expression turned grim. "Hollow Ground, he is very strong." The connotation being — trying to trick me? No way.

"Oh? So he was called Hollow Ground?" A mocking smirk appeared on Reiter's lips.

"He refused to reveal his code name to the very end, saying that he could not disgrace his country..."

"Bullshit, Hollow Ground can't be dead," retorted the clerk. Hollow Ground was one of the top ten spectres of the Federation — how could he fall so easily here?

Seeing this, Ling Lan had an idea. She asked, *"Little Four, can you imitate the energy signature of other spectres?"* Every spectre had a unique aura due to the signature of their spectre power — those familiar to it would very easily recognise a spectre by it, so there would be no incidents of accidental injury.

"Of course I can." Little Four pursed his lips, thinking that Boss was truly underestimating him too much by asking this question.

"That's great then. Wait for a moment. When you hear my command, immediately imitate Hollow Ground's energy signature and take the opportunity to kill the Caesar hacker." Ling Lan's eyes lit up, her plan taking form. *"Of course, make it look like a mutual destruction scenario."*

Little Four's eyes lit up at these words. This was a game he had never played before. He quickly nodded, indicating that he would do everything his boss said.

Meanwhile, Reiter could see that his opponent was shaken. His gaze flashed and he decided to continue agitating the other, because a spectre who had lost his composure would very easily reveal some weaknesses...

"All alone, he is very strong, but our side has more than one spectre." Reiter smiled placidly. At these words, the clerk's face paled. This was the potential scenario he had been most afraid of. One spectre alone would definitely not have been able to defeat Hollow Ground.

Taking advantage of this window of time while the opponent was still riled up, Reiter once again slyly sent a quick bolt of spectre power at the opponent in a sneak attack. However, Reiter was disappointed — though the clerk looked like he was not using his spectre powers, he had actually been on guard all this time. Sensing the opponent's spectre power attacking, his own power rose up to meet it instinctively.

Yet, the clerk knew that dragging things out like this with pure force would not end well for them. Even as he blocked the other spectre's attack, he threw a pointed glance at the commander, signalling for the other to find a chance and escape immediately...

These two attacks had given Reiter a pretty good idea of the opponent's strength, which was a hair weaker than his. Still, to finish off the opponent, he would first need to exhaust the other's spectre power — this would be a drawn-out battle of attrition. At this thought, Reiter began to regret sending Witt back to the secret base so soon...

There was still no news from the secret base thus far (Reiter did not know that the mediating contact, D1 and his team, had already been wiped out by Little Four). Reiter began to feel anxious. He knew very well what they had come here to do. If something happened at the secret base, the loss would not be mitigated even if he killed off everyone here.

Reiter's thoughts settled — he would not waste any more time. Mature and experienced spectres all had their own trump cards. For example, the trump card of his last opponent, Hollow Ground, had been that final deathblow. Similarly, as the team leader of the spectres in this operation, he too had his own trump card.

And so, Reiter's spectre power, which had already been stronger than his opponent by a little, suddenly became several times stronger. This took the clerk by surprise — with an involuntary grunt, he spewed out a mouthful of blood and his face turned as white as paper. This caused the expression of the commanding officer standing by his side to shift. The commander threw a look at his adjutant and the adjutant immediately grabbed hold of the clerk and began running towards the outside of the enemy's enclosure with the commander right behind them.

At the same time, some of their other team members suddenly broke free of their restraints and began attacking wildly. These actions flustered the people surrounding them, afraid that if they accidentally killed the opponents, they would die and resurrect elsewhere on the Swift Dragon base and cause further trouble for them.

Seeing this, Reiter shouted, "Impudence!" An overwhelming wave of spectre power rolled out to smash these Federation soldiers trying to make their last stand.

The clerk gritted his teeth and used the final bit of his spectre power to spread out a defensive shield to protect these brave comrades of his.

The power of the two spectres clashed violently once more and the clerk could not stop himself from throwing out mouthful after mouthful of blood. He could already feel his defensive shield about to be crushed by the opponent. At that time, it would be time for all of them to die. He was still too weak...

A deep surge of regret and unwillingness rose within the clerk's heart. If only he were as strong as Hollow Ground, perhaps then he would have been able to protect all these people and let them live. He could almost hear the sounds of shattering coming from his defensive shield. Just as he was about to give up hope and just wait for death to descend...

"Little Four, do it now!" Seeing this, Ling Lan ordered decisively.

A powerful surge of spectre power appeared suddenly to intercept the other spectre's power. The clerk's gaze brightened — it was Hollow Ground!

Hollow Ground successfully blocked the opponent's attack; when Reiter sensed this familiar power signature, his expression changed drastically and he was screaming in his heart that this was impossible.

Yes, he had clearly seen the other become white spots to vanish in the virtual world. He had confirmed that the other's consciousness had been erased under his and Witt's combined power... so why then would the spectre power belonging to Hollow Ground appear here at this time? He could not understand it. He was afraid. But he would no longer have any chance to ask any questions, because even as that wave of power blocked his attack, it leapt at him in a counterattack.

The strength behind the counterattack did not feel that strong, but Reiter found that his own spectre power was rapidly fading away. He was pushed back again and again, till he was actually being overpowered by the other's power...

This made no sense ¹ ! This was Reiter's final thought, because this change had occurred within the blink of an eye. Before Reiter could react, he had been erased by this seemingly unimpressive spectre power...

Everyone present saw the initially forceful and imperious Reiter suddenly explode into white spots that rapidly disappeared. The faces of the Caesarians changed; Reiter's sudden death let them know that things were not good. In contrast, this scene was like a shot of heart tonic to the soldiers of the Huaxia Federation, and they found their battle prowess magnified by several multiples...

Only the clerk had a sorrowful expression on his face. He could sense that as the enemy spectre's power had dissipated, Hollow Ground's spectre power had also begun to dissipate.

From the spectre power of Hollow Ground that had yet to dissipate from the air, the clerk could almost feel the other's dense reluctance to die, as well as his relief that his companions were safe and unharmed. The clerk was well aware that Hollow Ground had only died because that last attack was Hollow Ground's final trump card. The trump cards of Federation spectres were basically all methods of mutual destruction. This was related to the unyielding character of the Huaxian people... Hollow Ground must have already been on his last legs ² after going through consecutive battles, yet he had still rushed over to save them. In the end, he had even sacrificed his life to save them.

Hollow Ground, rest in peace! The clerk closed his damp eyes, pushing down the grief in his mind.

Chapter 345

Ultimate Weapon!

When the clerk opened his eyes again once more, there was no longer any trace of sorrow within his eyes. All that was left was an endless coldness. Since Hollow Ground had left his hopes of life to them, then he would have to complete the mission Hollow Ground had handed to him — he would protect his team members and make sure they escaped from this place.

The clerk stared coldly at the enemies who were beginning to panic. Ignoring his injuries, he forcefully circulated his spectre power which was nearly exhausted to wipe out all the enemies' consciousness. Let these people be sacrificial offerings for Hollow Ground...

However, forcefully overdrafting his spectre power made the clerk pay a heavy price. For some time after this, he would not be able to use his spectre power at all. Still, the clerk felt that it was worth it!

Seeing the clerk kill off all of the enemies, the commander and his adjutant instantly breathed a mental sigh of relief. Looking at their other team members who had survived with them, they had a strong sense of having evaded a disaster. However, their mood became heavy again very soon, because the clerk told them that he was unable to use his spectre power for the time being. In other words, he could no longer protect them, so it would probably be dangerous to continue staying here. No one could tell whether that unidentified faction had any other spectres with them after all.

As such, the commander quickly decided to withdraw his entire team. On the way, they did not forget to send a message to their waiting companions about the plan to control the starship — they would follow their original plan to escape from the Swift Dragon base.

Although they were not sure where this unidentified faction had come from, they already knew that the Swift Dragon base was now under the enemy's control. Their mission was pretty much completed. Furthermore, the commander was afraid that there were still other spectres in the base. In order to protect the lives of his team members, he needed to bring his team members to escape from this place as soon as

possible.

Little Four, who had been secretly monitoring them all this while, immediately intercepted the message they sent and fabricated an 'order received' message from the targeted waiting team in response to the commander's message.

Meanwhile, at this time, at the spaceport of the Swift Dragon base, the Federation soldiers who had already taken action earlier had taken control of the starship without any difficulty. They did not know that they had accomplished it so easily because Little Four had already finished off all the top-class hackers from Caesar controlling the base. Otherwise, even though they still had a hacker providing cover by creating false information, they would have still been discovered by the enemy hackers controlling the base.

They waited patiently for the commander's arrival on the starship; they had sent the news of their success to the commander when they had taken control of the ship. However, the commander's team seemed to have encountered some difficulty, for he only sent a message telling them to wait patiently before going silent. This made the waiting team begin to feel a little uneasy.

Sure enough, it was not long before they noticed that the defence of the Swift Dragon base had suddenly tightened up. The guards of the base had begun closely examining the NPC survivors at the temporary camp. This made them even more anxious and worried. They were anxious that they were about to be exposed, and they were also worried that it would become infinitely more difficult for the commander's team to sneak back to the starship.

However, after waiting for about half an hour, the commander sent another message: *'Already here. Open the emergency access. Let us board.'* The arrival of this news was an instant relief to the waiting soldiers.

The commander's team silently boarded the starship; the entire process was so smooth and unhindered that they almost could not believe it. Many times, it had clearly seemed as if the other party was about to discover them, but then the other side would be strangely drawn away by something to head in another direction instead. Puzzled, they could only believe that their luck today must be off the charts allowing them to sail through danger again and again.

In order to ensure security, the Federation soldiers who were there earlier had already

killed off all the NPC soldiers guarding the starship. This allowed the commander's team to instantly relax once they boarded. They did not hesitate to go directly to the main control room of the starship. With the limited amount of manpower they had, they could only focus on getting the starship safely started; they had no mind to bother with the other areas of the ship.

Anxious to rejoin his comrades, the commander did not notice that not long after they left the emergency access, the access opened again silently. Ling Lan, who had been following them all this way, quietly slipped into the starship.

Little Four mastered the entire starship instantly and very soon found the hiding spots of Qi Long and the others.

Without hesitation, Ling Lan walked towards Qi Long and the others' hiding places. Her arrangements had been set — now, she only needed to wait patiently for these Federation soldiers to start the starship and bring them back to the central district.

On the way to reunite with Qi Long and the others, Little Four did not forget to brag about his achievements in the mindscape. The communications between both the Federation parties were actually fake — Little Four had intercepted all messages on both ends before sending them out at the perfect timings, leaving no signs of his involvement.

The moment the commander arrived at the control room, without giving himself time to catch his breath, he had already begun instructing his team members to take over the operations of the various key procedures of the starship. Once everything was prepared, he gave the order to start the starship.

While the starship was still, the NPCs of the Swift Dragon base had not noticed anything amiss here. But when it was suddenly activated, the loud roar of its engines and the energy response it gave out instantly startled the calm spaceport into wakefulness. Everyone in the Swift Dragon base knew immediately that their starship had been hijacked by an unknown faction.

This made the administrators of the Swift Dragon base extremely angry. They decisively dispatched the armoured missile troops of the base to bombard the starship, trying to destroy the ship before it fully activated.

Everyone in the starship stared nervously at the activation progress of the starship.

For the starship to launch and fly, it needed to gather 100% of its power, and the prep time for this was a full three minutes. Everyone knew that these three minutes would very likely determine whether they would be able to escape from the Swift Dragon base.

"Commander, they've fired the attack missiles," reported a team member, having seen the warning sign on the screen of the radar he was monitoring.

"Activate the defensive shield first," said the commander through clenched teeth in the end, after considering several options in his mind in quick succession.

"Yes!" Another team member in charge of operating the defence system decisively turned on the defensive shield. The power store which had been shored up to 10% dropped in one go to rock bottom again. In other words, the starship had to start shoring up energy all over again.

Still, the commander's directive was correct. Activating the beam shield prevented the many missiles from destroying the main body of the starship. But even so, the explosive force of the missiles shook the starship around enough to make the people inside stagger.

In the #3 mecha hold of the starship, Ling Lan's team were already seated in the standard mecha of this starship within secure seats. The anti-shock system of the mecha themselves was also much more stable than that of the starship, so despite feeling the vibrations, they were not as thrown by it as the people in the control room.

Seeing this, Qi Long's loud voice rang out again in the team's comms. "D*mn, this mission is just too exciting! Whether going or returning, it's all so thrilling!"

"If it wasn't thrilling, would it be called an SSS-rank?" responded Han Jijyun lightly, leaving Qi Long speechless.

Several soft snickers could be heard within the channel — it was Xie Yi, Lin Zhong-qing, and the others. To make Qi Long shut up, other than Boss Lan, only Han Jijyun could do it.

The others were still alright, but Chang Xinyuan was rather nervous. He could not help but ask, "We'll be fine, right?"

Ever since Ling Lan had brought up the fact that if they died here, they would revive

within the Swift Dragon base and not the central district, Chang Xinyuan had been afraid he would die here due to the little bit of mecha control skills of his that were utter rubbish. That would hold the team back, forcing Boss Lan and the others to turn back to save him.

"Yes. The defensive shield has already been activated. The anti-aircraft missiles of the base won't do much damage to the starship," replied Ling Lan evenly. Little Four was faithfully reflecting everything that was happening in the control room to her mindspace.

Ling Lan's words made everyone on the team calm down. They knew that it was not as simple as Boss Lan had said to escape from the Swift Dragon base. Every base possessed ultimate weapons to deal with starships and powerful mecha — their only hope was that the supreme commander of the Swift Dragon base would choose not to utilise those weapons out of concern that there might be soldiers from the base on the starship.

Finally, the starship's power gauge was full. The commander shouted joyfully, "Start moving at low speed!"

Amidst the echoes of this order, the team member in charge of operating the starship slowly lifted the head of the starship and the starship slowly rose into the air.

At this time, witnessing this scene, the command team of the command centre turned to look anxiously at the supreme commander of the Swift Dragon base, awaiting his final order.

The supreme commander calmly zoomed in on the image of the starship and then slammed a hand onto the screen. He ordered, "Activate the ultimate weapon, the magnetic energy beam cannon."

At this command, everyone's expressions shifted. Even though some still felt it was rather inappropriate, in the strictly hierarchal NPC world, the lower level officers did not dare to voice any objections.

By this time, the starship had already pulled several hundred metres away from the ground. As long as it could rise up to a height of 2000 metres, it could shift from low speed to high speed and leave the gravity pull of the base's planet to truly enter outer space. Only at that time would they truly be safe. Everyone in the starship's control

room had cold sweat pouring from their foreheads. This was generally the most dangerous period for starships — this was the moment where starships were most easily struck by weaponry attacks from the ground.

Suddenly, the team member monitoring the surrounding situation yelled out in horror, "The base has activated its ultimate weapon! We'll be shot down..."

The commander rushed over when he heard this. On the edges of the base, he saw what had seemed to be a large but normal, barren mountain suddenly split open, a massive cannon barrel slowly rising from its depths. Although only its head was currently visible, the commander could tell what it was with just one look. His face instantly drained of all colour.

If the starship was destroyed, even though they would not really die, with their resurrection point set to the Swift Dragon base, it would not be long before they were certain to become the prisoners of the opponent. The commander did not have the confidence to successfully lead his team in escaping death for the second time. By the time headquarters noticed anything wrong and sent more people to stage a rescue, it would still be a month later at the very quickest... if the unknown enemy still had spectres hidden within the secret base, they might really end up losing all their lives here.

At this time, the adjutant who had been standing quietly behind the commander all this time suddenly spoke up to say, "I'll go."

Chapter 346

Death Descends!

The commander understood what the adjutant meant and immediately retorted, "No, that's too dangerous." Even though the adjutant's strength was infinitely close to imperial level, he had still not reached it after all. Relying on the defensive shield of an ace mecha alone against the base's ultimate weapon would at most buy the starship another ten to twenty seconds...

"We can't just sit here and wait for death. If we can earn a bit more time, then we need to fight our hardest for it," argued the adjutant passionately.

"But, if anything happens to you, you will have no choice but to remain at the Swift Dragon base." The commander told the adjutant the likely outcome of his actions.

"That's still better than having everyone remain here. If by any chance something happens to me, as long as you all live to return, then you'll be able to submit a timely report. That will make it much faster for a rescue team to be sent... I believe that I should still be able to hold out for a short three to four days," said the adjutant with a determined air. It could not be denied that he possessed the self-confidence and pride of an ace mecha operator deep in his bones.

The commander cast a silent look at the adjutant, then nodded solemnly and said, "Fine. Go and make your preparations. I'll let the members of team C act as your personal JMC to guide your movements." At this point, the commander paused for a moment before adding a final statement, "Take care!"

The adjutant saluted respectfully. "Yes! Sir!" Done speaking, he resolutely turned to leave the control room of the starship. As he turned, all the members of the control room, including the commander, silently saluted him. This was a sign of respect as well as a blessing for a comrade.

Meanwhile, on Ling Lan's end, she had received news of the activation of the Swift Dragon base's ultimate weapon at first notice. This made her mood turn extremely grim, for every base had its own ultimate weapon whose power was exceedingly horrifying. It was the last resort to protect a base — a sure-kill weapon against

starships and powerful mecha. No matter how strong the starship's energy shield was, it would at most be able to endure one strike from this weapon. After that one strike, the starship's accumulated power would be completely depleted. It could be imagined that a starship without an energy shield would be a blatant sitting duck — any slightly powerful weapon would be able to riddle the starship with holes.

This development had pushed Ling Lan's team into a dire situation. The moment they died, their mission would be judged as a failure. Moreover, the key thing was that they could not leave the Swift Dragon base either if that happened, and so would have no way of returning to the real world. Sure enough, an SSS-rank mission was extremely insane. Even the ultimate weapon of a base had been brought into play.

Seeing the adjutant volunteer, an idea sparked in Ling Lan's mind. She said to Qi Long, "Qi Long, later, no matter what happens, you must bring the team back alive to the central district and complete our mission."

Qi Long did not understand why his boss was saying this, but whatever Boss said to do, he would of course do his best to do. Thus, he acknowledged the order seriously.

Li Lanfeng was stunned by Ling Lan's words, but he quickly figured out the other's intent. With a shift in his expression, he said, "Rabbit, you're going out?" Instantly, Ling Lan's half-dead, battered appearance after he had intercepted the magnetic tsunami with an imperial mecha appeared in Li Lanfeng's mind's eye, and Li Lanfeng felt his heart shudder.

Li Lanfeng's words instantly enlightened the other members of the team about what Ling Lan was planning to do. They all immediately spoke up in protest — they did not want to lose contact with Boss again.

Seeing this, Ling Lan cast a cold glance at everyone and then said calmly, "Obey my orders!"

Although Ling Lan's tone of voice was extremely calm, her team members still felt a chill permeate their bodies. This cooled their ardent spirits instantaneously — their courage frozen in its tracks — and they did not dare to object any further.

Only Li Lanfeng was not frightened into silence by Ling Lan. Perhaps due to his exceptionally strong mental fortitude, or perhaps out of courage due to his deep concern, he once again spoke up to say, "Rabbit, if you want to go, I'll go with you." He

absolutely would not leave the rabbit behind and escape on his own.

Ling Lan merely controlled her mecha to reach out its right hand and tapped Li Lanfeng's mecha lightly on its head. "Leopard, you are still too weak. If you want to help me, improve your strength first. Otherwise, following me will just hold me back. Also, I have faith in you. Don't let me down."

That said, Ling Lan walked out of her mecha's secured seat and let Little Four command the transport system of the ship to move her mecha to the launching device of the ejection port.

Li Lanfeng was saddened by Ling Lan's words. So he was actually that weak in his rabbit's heart and was holding the other back? These words were truly quite hurtful... he sat within his cockpit and clenched his fists, cursing his infirm body for the first time.

No, he could not be discouraged just like that. Next time, he must make the rabbit understand that he, Li Lanfeng, was capable enough to fight by his side. Li Lanfeng touched the document in his bag. Since he could not help the rabbit at his current level of strength, then he could not disappoint the rabbit any further. He must live to hand this document over to the city lord of Grandsweep City and complete the rabbit's clan-formation mission.

When she found out that the adjutant had already been ejected successfully, Ling Lan then let Little Four arrange for her to be ejected by the starship's launch system. Of course, due to Little Four's interference, the figure of Ling Lan's mecha did not appear on the large display screen of the starship control room. This was also why Ling Lan dared to launch herself into space so blatantly; her movements would never be discovered by these Federation soldiers.

Finally, the base's ultimate weapon was revealed in its entirety. Viewing the image Little Four transmitted over, Ling Lan could not help but feel frightened. Just looking at its outer appearance, one could tell that this was a powerful ultimate weapon. Its ferocious form and its muzzle, which was several tens of metres wide in radius, were signs of how horrific the energy it would blast out was sure to be. A magnetic storm was scary because its associated energy turbulence was too vast and enduring, while an ultimate weapon was horrifying because it focused all its massive power onto a single point. This allowed it to very easily wipe out a target it had locked onto.

"Based on the outer shape of this weapon, I've found some relevant data. It's part of the Federation ultimate weapon series: a magnetic energy beam cannon! It has powerful attack capacity — capable of smashing through all of its target's external defence systems, and at the same time, the terrible magnetic energy it carries can destroy the internal systems of its target." Little Four immediately told Ling Lan all about the ultimate weapon of the Swift Dragon base, giving Ling Lan a good idea of what to expect.

"What a troublesome thing." Ling Lan frowned. Such powerful energy... if they relied on the Pulsing King Shield of her imperial mecha, they could actually still withstand it. The problem was that the weapon possessed magnetic energy capable of destroying a mecha's internal system as well. This would affect the power circulatory system in the mecha. An imperial mecha without power support would actually be no different from the average mecha.

She glanced at the x192 high-glazed nuclear power source equipped on the imperial mecha and hoped it would be reliable enough to withstand an attack from the magnetic energy beam cannon.

Right then, the starship had successfully climbed up to about 1500 metres. Meanwhile, the ultimate weapon, the magnetic energy beam cannon, had finally stored up enough energy as well to reveal its savage side. A magnetic energy beam shot out from the base, aimed right for the starship suspended in the air.

"Concentrate all power on the point being attacked!" bellowed the commander. At this moment, he had lost his usual composure. If this ultimate weapon was too strong, they might not even be able to withstand one blow.

The magnetic energy beam slammed heavily into the defensive shield of the starship. The power of its blast lasted a whole 20 seconds. During these 20 seconds, the starship was shaken violently by the powerful energy attack. Everyone in the control room was almost thrown to the ground. However, these soldiers were all battle-hardened warriors. They clutched tightly to the control panel before them, and thus were not sent tumbling by the violent vibrations.

Twenty seconds later, when the final bit of the beam from the magnetic energy beam cannon faded away, only then was it discovered that the starship remained high up in the air, but its appearance was battered and dark. The dull and bleak looking outer hull of the starship proved that the starship's power had been utterly depleted; it

could no longer maintain its energy shield.

The high-ranking officers in the control room of the base could not help but cheer at the sight. A smile appeared on the supreme commander's face, and then he ordered decisively, "Let the armoured missile troops continue to attack."

When the armoured missile troop on the ground received this command, they once again fired their missiles. But very quickly, they found that their attacks were futile. An ace mecha had appeared beneath the starship, and it was striking down any missiles that were attacking the starship. Before the missiles could reach the starship, the mecha had already shot them down.

When the command centre heard this news, everyone waited for the supreme commander's orders.

The supreme commander frowned as he looked at the grandstanding ace mecha in the sky and then also looked at the starship struggling desperately to replenish its power. He gave a decisive order. "Fire the second round of the magnetic energy beam cannon!"

When the starship's main control room saw the ultimate weapon of the base begin to flash and accumulate light again, the men's faces turned terribly pale. "Sir, they're preparing to fire the second round. Are we done for?"

Seeing that the starship had only recovered 17% of its power, despair was present in everyone's hearts. A full 100% power level had only been barely enough to block the attack of that magnetic energy beam cannon. However, the result of all that effort was still an inevitable 13% damage done to the starship. Fortunately, the crucial flight system of the starship had not been destroyed; this was their good fortune.

"Speed up power accumulation. We can only gather up to 50% power. Whether or not we reach the required altitude, we'll have to switch to high-speed operation." With a grit of his teeth, the commander prepared to take this final gamble. He looked at the ace mecha struggling to defend the starship — he would place his hopes on the other, hoping that the other would be able to help the starship obtain the final bit of time to accumulate power.

Everyone stared nervously at the team member in charge of reporting on the progress of the power accumulation. They could only hope that they could hit 50% power

before the ultimate weapon fired its second round.

"Power accumulation at 20%... 25%... 30%... 35%..." When the team member reported till 35%, the muzzle of the base's ultimate weapon finally erupted in a dazzling blaze of sparks. In the eyes of everyone on the starship, these sparks were undoubtedly the flowers of death here to collect their lives.

"No...!" Heaven knows who yelled this. Everyone instinctively held on tightly to the control panel before them and closed their eyes, waiting for death to descend upon them.

Chapter 347

Ace Operator!

The adjutant was busy striking down those missiles when his mecha suddenly emitted an emergency alarm. He found that the magnetic energy beam cannon was preparing to shoot once again and unleash its second powerful energy beam.

"For the honour of the Huaxia Federation!" mouthed the adjutant silently. This was the only phrase the Huaxians knew to say on the battlefield — this was a display of their strong attachment to their country, as well as a heartfelt explanation of their final decisions.

A savage light appeared in the eyes of the adjutant. He operated his mecha and pushed it to its maximum power, bringing out the ace mecha's most powerful beam shield as he resolutely went up to meet this overbearing beam cannon.

Five seconds... ten seconds... the adjutant let out a great roar in his cockpit. He tolerated the intense agony the strong magnetic energy wrought upon his body, watching calmly as the power of his mecha dropped rapidly until it was finally empty... only 23 seconds had passed.

What a pity! Before his mecha was completely consumed by the magnetic energy, the adjutant only hoped regretfully in his heart that the starship would be able to hold out on its own for the final 7 seconds it needed to gather power.

The adjutant had no way of seeing the final outcome. His mecha, with him inside, was completely devoured by the magnetic energy beam, instantly turning into a cloud of gas to disappear into the air. Right then, Ling Lan, who had been hiding to one side but was long prepared, controlled her imperial mecha to instantly leap forwards and take the adjutant's place, blocking the remaining magnetic energy beam directed at the starship.

This time, Little Four expended his greatest disguising ability to make Ling Lan's imperial mecha look like the adjutant's ace mecha. Whether it was in the starship's control room or at the command centre of the ground base, all they could see was an ace mecha holding off the magnetic energy beam cannon's attack. When the beam

energy ran out, what was revealed in the aftermath was still that extremely battered yet surviving ace mecha!

"He did it!" the commander could not help but shout in exhilaration at the sight of the resilient ace mecha. No one wished for the comrades by their side to die, even if they were in the virtual world.



On a hill at the edge of the Swift Dragon base, an ace mecha was standing there looking out into distant space at the ace mecha that had held off the attack of the magnetic energy beam cannon. He said in a cold tone, "That starship is most probably carrying the enemy that gave D1 no choice but to activate the ultimate weapon system."

"Senior Colonel, you're right. I've observed the other people staying at the Swift Dragon base. They are all NPCs. The investigative soldiers the Huaxia Federation sent are definitely on that ship." The person on the other end of the comms channel confirmed the thoughts of the ace operator.

"Planning to leave the Swift Dragon base just like that? In your dreams." Killing intent flashed through the ace operator's eyes as he sneered and said, "Send me into the sky. I want to greet that ace mecha, and finish off that starship along the way."

"Yes, Senior Colonel!" With that shout, a hole suddenly opened under the spot where the ace mecha was standing. The mecha dropped instantly as if swallowed by the earth.

But very soon, a tube coloured like the hill rose diagonally from the ground, and several seconds later, a muffled sound rang out. That ace mecha was instantly sent shooting into the sky like a cannonball.

When the senior officers in the command centre of the base saw this, some of the officers were baffled. Where had this unexpected ace mecha come from? At that moment, the supreme commander of the Swift Dragon base could be heard to explain, "This is our ace mecha."

The supreme commander's words calmed everyone down and they waited patiently for the final outcome. The power of the magnetic energy beam cannon was indeed very strong, but its energy consumption was also very horrific. If there were other

ways to finish off these invading enemies, they would happily save energy resources and not shoot a third round of the magnetic energy beam cannon.



"Boss, an ace mecha is coming." That mecha had just been launched when he had been noticed by Little Four who was monitoring the whole scene, and Little Four quickly informed Ling Lan.

*"Godd*mmmit, how could there be an ace mecha in the Swift Dragon base?"* This kind of small base generally had an advanced mecha at the most. This inexplicable appearance of a mysterious ace mecha made Ling Lan feel that trouble was coming.

"It's not an NPC." Little Four only had time to say this before that ace mecha was already by Ling Lan's side and was fiercely leaping at her.

Little Four's warning made Ling Lan's heart clench — if the other wasn't an NPC, then he must be a real person. Moreover, soldiers of the Huaxia Federation would never attack a teammate without reason, so this ace operator was very likely from Caesar.

With a 'bang', Ling Lan swiftly drew the beam saber on her back and parried the opponent's fierce attack in time.

"Boss, do you want me to kill him?" asked Little Four in a cold voice, killing intent flashing through his eyes.

Ling Lan controlled her mecha to kick out savagely. Seeing this fierce kick coming at him, the opponent became wary and quickly dodged. The two mecha once again pulled apart from one another, but both sides knew very well that this distance was nothing for ace mecha — they would be able to reach their opponent within the blink of an eye.

Ling Lan was guarding carefully against the other but had begun plotting in her mind. If Little Four could act, they could indeed finish off the opponent easily. But the problem was that there was still a spectre on the ship. The moment Little Four used his spectre-like powers, the other would notice it. This would be a large flaw because ace operators just could not be spectres; therefore, it would be very easy to guess that there was the presence of a third faction at the Swift Dragon base. This way, her ideal plan would be broken — it would become completely pointless to try and use the

Federation soldiers as her team's shield.

Ling Lan absolutely would not allow her team members to be exposed. Thus, she decisively rejected Little Four's offer and prepared to resist on her own.

In truth, Ling Lan was extremely confident in herself. With the imperial mecha she was controlling now and her control skills that were no lower than an ace operator's, she was still pretty confident she could win this match. Her only concern was that she could not fight in an imperial mecha for over 5 minutes. Otherwise, her body would not be able to withstand the feedback force from the cross-level operation.

Furthermore, because she had blocked the magnetic energy beam cannon, she had already wasted about a minute of that time. Thus, she needed to finish this fight and destroy the other mecha within 4 minutes. Ling Lan's eyes glinted with a cold light, planning inside her heart on how she could end the fight quickly.

Ling Lan saw Regretless lying silently in her bag and an idea flashed through her mind. She immediately instructed Little Four on what he needed to do next...

Very soon, the two mecha once again collided forcefully together. This time, Ling Lan was the one to initiate the attack — she did not have much time left and could not afford to wait. It should be said the skills of the two operators were about equal — the collision of their beam sabers created countless sparks. Whether it was the mainship or the base command centre, everyone was closely watching the fight of the two ace mecha.

The intense battle lasted for less than a minute. Perhaps due to exhausting too much energy from blocking the magnetic energy beam cannon's attack previously, the thruster on one side of Ling Lan's mecha suddenly exploded. From the dazzling sparks and the accompanying thick black smoke, one could tell that the mecha had received pretty significant damage. As expected, without an engine on one side to provide counterbalance, Ling Lan's mecha instantly lost its centre of balance and actually began to tumble over.

But Ling Lan did not give up — she activated her mecha's secondary thruster and tried to regain the balance of her mecha. However, how could the opponent pass this chance by? That ace mecha suddenly flipped to face downwards and then revved its engines to actually begin speeding towards Ling Lan.

Seeing this, while maintaining the balance of her mecha, Ling Lan gritted her teeth and pulled out her beam saber to meet the fierce thrust of the other's beam saber.

With a 'boom', the two beam sabers collided fiercely. One was buffed by the gravitational force of moving downwards, while the other was held up by an awkward, forced lift of the arm. The gap between the strength behind the two swords was completely displayed by the beam sabers.

Due to the opponent's great strength, Ling Lan could no longer hold on to her beam saber. It was sent flying by the opponent, and the beam saber fell from the skies to stab heavily into the ground.

Witnessing this scene, those Federation soldiers watching closely from the military vessel's control room turned pale. Some of them could not help but exclaim in shock and leap to their feet.

Having sent the opponent's weapon flying with one move, the ace operator was exhilarated. Without hesitation, he grabbed onto the Huaxian ace mecha, who was currently preparing to shoot its beam gun to try and stop him from approaching, enduring two shots from the opponent. The beam saber in his right hand stabbing forwards viciously towards other's cockpit...

"Success!" The ace operator saw his beam saber piercing through the other's cockpit like slicing through bamboo and was overjoyed. He knew he had won, but before he could laugh out in celebration, he suddenly felt a chill run through his body. And then, intense pain shot straight into his heart, causing him to yell out involuntarily.

"What's happening?" The ace mecha looked blankly at the black cold weapon that had appeared without warning in his cockpit. That weapon had sliced his body into two, and his entire cockpit was splattered in blood.

For some reason, the ace operator really wanted to deride the virtual world of the Huaxia Federation for being too realistic and bloody. This bit was really not good — they should learn from Caesar and make things more mild and pleasant. Even he, a battle-hardened warrior, felt somewhat queasy at the sight. He could almost really feel his waist being chopped in half — if this had happened to a newbie, that person would most likely be useless after this...

A life countdown began in the virtual world. The ace operator smiled wryly to himself

and pressed a button to replay the last few moments. Only then did he discover that when he had pierced the other's cockpit, this black cold weapon had suddenly appeared in the opponent's initially empty right hand. Because the other's hand was positioned perfectly at a blind spot of all his cameras, he had not noticed. This was why he had found the attack baffling.

"I forgot that the Huaxians favour mutual destruction the most," said the ace operator in frustration. With its control systems destroyed, his mecha could no longer remain airborne and it plummeted without warning.

On his display screen, the ace mecha operator saw his opponent's mecha falling faster than his own, and a satisfied smile appeared at the corner of his lips. At least he would die later than the other. By the time they revived, he would definitely find the other for a rematch...

Ten seconds or so later, that Huaxian ace mecha slammed into the ground first. Right afterwards, he too slammed into the ground, and subsequently, a massive explosion rocked the ground. The fallen mecha were instantly blasted into dust — it was no longer possible to distinguish who was who — and at the same time, the Caesarian ace mecha operator's final bit of awareness was consumed.

Chapter 348

Escape in High Gear!

When the Caesarian ace operator regained consciousness once more and opened his eyes, he had already returned to the resurrection point of the Swift Dragon base.

The resurrection point of the Swift Dragon base was actually a large room. Normally, the room doors were tightly shut and the NPC soldiers would never enter this area. This was because the mainframe had set it so that resurrection points were considered safe spots. Anyone who resurrected here would never be discovered by the NPC soldiers as long as they did not exit the doors.

The Caesarian ace operator stood up feeling regretful but found that there was someone peeking around the room doors... black hair and yellow skin, it most definitely had to be that Huaxian who had died alongside him. He decisively drew the dagger at his calf and leapt over.

Hearing the whistle of the wind, that person rolled forwards and evaded his strike. The man turned to look at his attacker and his irises contracted. "Caesarian." He was the adjutant who had died by the force of the magnetic energy beam cannon. Having just come out of the resurrection point, he had had no choice but to stick around the area due to the patrolling guards of the base outside the doors. Of course, he also did not know what had happened outside.

"This time, you will still die by my hand!" The ace operator from Caesar pounced as he cried out gleefully.

The adjutant was taken aback by those words, and then as if figuring something out, his gaze narrowed as he once again dodged the other's attack. Tone hateful, he asked, "The magnetic energy beam cannon, you all were the ones who arranged its activation?"

The Caesarian ace operator sneered with a blade in his hands. "Looks like you aren't stupid. Indeed, if we hadn't changed the settings, how could the supreme commander of this base mobilise the base's ultimate weapon for just a small starship?"

It turned out that that final message sent out by D1 was primarily to the supreme commander of the base. It ordered the other to kill off all invaders at any cost. Of course, once the ultimate weapon was mobilised, those final members of Caesar still hiding on the Caesarian spaceship would be able to find out in time that something had gone wrong.

If Little Four had been a little more careful back then, he would have noticed in time. With Little Four's capabilities, he could have changed this order completely, perhaps even uncover the hidden Caesarian spaceship based on the clues obtained from the message. Then, he would have been able to find the Caesarians hiding aboard the ship and silently annihilate all of them, truly wrapping up all loose ends.

Then, Ling Lan and the others, including the Federation soldiers, would not have been thrown into this current predicament. They would not have had to tide through difficulty after difficulty; they would definitely have been able to easily depart from the Swift Dragon base... it could only be said that Little Four, who had learned something of human emotions, had also picked up some of the weaknesses of humans at the same time. For example, carelessness, or the tendency to hide some little secrets he felt were not very important and would not affect the larger picture...

The Caesarian ace operator's words caused an expression of realisation to appear on the adjutant's face. He had in fact been puzzling over the matter all this while — the ultimate weapon would typically not be mobilised unless the survival of the base was threatened. They had only hijacked a ship and tried to flee the base — this would not affect the safety of the base at all, so the ultimate weapon should not have been activated.

Taking the other's explanation into consideration, everything made sense now. The adjutant looked sullenly at the Caesarian before him and responded belligerently, "I will not die a second time by your hand." The magnetic energy beam cannon was too powerful for him to resist, so he had no complaints about dying to it, but he definitely would not die at the hands of an equally human enemy.

The two of them confronted each other in a stalemate for several seconds, and then they suddenly leapt at each other. The adjutant pulled out a short dagger from behind his waist in an instant, stabbing it viciously at the opponent.

"Clang clang clang..." Cold weapons clashed again and again. Both of them being ace operators, their physical skills were equally good. They were actually fighting on even

ground — it would be hard to determine a winner anytime soon.

Excitement bloomed in the eyes of the Caesarian ace operator. As expected, the one who dared to pull a mutual destruction move on him was an extremely formidable adversary. Due to Ling Lan's ingenious scheme, the Caesarian ace operator could never have known that he had actually misidentified his opponent.

Meanwhile, because the adjutant had stayed in this room all this time after reviving, he was not very clear on some things that had transpired. He hated the other side for mobilising the ultimate weapon and stranding him at the Swift Dragon base, and after finding out that this was all a nefarious scheme of Caesar, he had taken the other to be an enemy right away and could not wait to kill the other.

In this manner, for various reasons coupled with some clever manipulation from Ling Lan, her hand in the matter was completely concealed. Until the very end, the Huaxia Federation and the Caesar Empire never discovered that there had been the involvement of a hidden third party between them.



After finishing off the Caesarian ace operator, Ling Lan finally let out a breath of relief. In truth, that final scene had all been an illusion by Little Four. The so-called explosion of the engine and the mecha losing control were all fake — even the beam saber had been intentionally discarded by her to fool the opponent. The scene of plunging his blade into Ling Lan's cockpit the other saw was naturally also an illusion. It was impossible for an ace mecha's beam saber to pierce through the cockpit of an imperial mecha. The other's beam saber had only grazed by the waist of Ling Lan's mecha, not harming Ling Lan's mecha one bit.

In the end, taking advantage of the moment the other had let down his guard in joy, Ling Lan had equipped Regretless, which she had long kept on standby, to pierce through the other's cockpit. Regretless's unique sharpness once again showed its prowess — the outer shell of the ace mecha had no way of stopping Regretless. The blade pierced cleanly through the cockpit to kill the opponent instantly.

However, this bout of control, fighting, and calculation had indeed tired Ling Lan out to the extreme as well, and her stamina was also at its limit. Ling Lan knew that she needed to return to the starship as soon as possible, otherwise, her body would not be able to take it if she continued to operate this imperial mecha.

When they saw their team's adjutant choosing mutual destruction with the enemy, all the Huaxian soldiers in the control room of the starship closed their eyes in pain... in order to live so they could return and report this situation to military headquarters, they had no choice but to abandon their comrade who had given his life to win them this opportunity. This feeling was very painful to them. Their only consolation was that they were currently in the virtual world. As long as there were no spectres, their comrade would only be temporarily trapped here without any danger to his life.

Right at this moment, a team member who had been keeping his post and monitoring the progress of the power accumulation all this while suddenly shouted, "Reporting to the commander! Power at 50%!"

At these words, the commander's eyes sprang open and forcefully suppressing his worry for his adjutant, a trace of resolution flashed across his eyes. He instantly gave the order, "Shift to high gear immediately!"

Subsequently, the team member in charge of speed control firmly pushed the speed dial to its maximum setting.

"Order received. Shifting starship operation from low gear to high gear... warning, actual height is insufficient, gravitational force is too large. Starship may be damaged. Warning, insufficient power. High gear can only be sustained for 7 minutes. Please choose carefully, please choose carefully..." The starship's A.I. processed the actual situation and made a determination, instantly issuing an emergency alarm alerting the starship operators that shifting speed settings now was a mistake and was extremely dangerous.

The team members that were in charge of shifting speeds lifted their heads to cast a panicked look at their commander when they heard this alert from the A.I... After all, they were not specialized starship operators. Encountering this sort of unanticipated situation, they were flustered, unsure what they should do.

The commander clapped his hands fiercely together and said firmly, "Shift to high gear. We'll take the risk." If he continued to dilly-dally, once the enemy fired the third round of the magnetic energy beam cannon, they would truly be doomed. He definitely must not waste this time the adjutant had sacrificed his life to give them. He must lead his team members back to the central district successfully and report the situation to military headquarters in time. This way, he would also be able to save the adjutant faster...

"Confirm shift to high gear. Countdown begins now. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, shift to high gear successful. Beginning power drain countdown. 420, 419, 418..." The A.I. executed the command to shift to high gear. The moment time was up, the initially slowly climbing starship suddenly sped upwards at high velocity like a propelled arrow.

Because they had not achieved the minimum required height to switch to high speed, under the opposing forces of gravity and the propulsion force of the engine, a part of the armour on the tail part of the starship was ripped off to fall from a height of 1800 meters...

However, the starship still flew on tenaciously. As a plume of smoke curled around its tail, it prepared to break through the atmospheric layer to enter outer space!

"Commander, now what?" As the starship suddenly accelerated, zooming towards the skies above, the calibrating magnetic energy beam cannon instantly lost its target. The officer in charge of attacking this time immediately reported this to the supreme commander of the base.

The supreme commander wordlessly put down his polar telescope. The power of the magnetic energy beam cannon was indeed very horrifying, but once a target entered higher airspace, especially at the extreme high speeds of the starship in question, it was very hard for the cannon to do anything. In the end, he could only say regretfully, "Forget it. Formally seal away the ultimate weapon. Consider them lucky this time, actually managing to escape from the Swift Dragon base."

"Yes! Commander!" The officer responsible for the magnetic energy beam cannon immediately arranged for the cannon to be sealed and put away.

After this remark, the supreme commander stubbornly raised his polar telescope again to stare out at that starship that was about to fly out of the atmospheric layer. An idea sparked through his mind and he set the telescope down. Turning to the officer beside him, he said, "New orders. All able fighting crew of the Swift Dragon base are to assemble immediately and board their ships. Thirty minutes later, we will officially take flight and give chase to our warship that has been taken hostage. We must destroy it within the range of the Nebula Boundary."

"Yes, Sir!" The adjutant by his side instantly accepted the order and turned to disseminate this urgent call to arms.

Several seconds later, an ear-splitting emergency alarm blared out across the entire base. In all the encampments, the base's DMC's voice rang out, "Emergency notice. All able warriors of the Swift Dragon fleet, please assemble at your respective warships within 30 minutes. Thirty minutes later, the fleet will officially set off... Emergency notice. All able warriors of the Swift Dragon fleet, please assemble at your respective warships within 30 minutes. Thirty minutes later, the fleet will..."

The entire Swift Dragon base began to bustle with activity as all of the warriors rushed towards the respective warships they were assigned to. Thirty minutes was extremely tight; they had not a moment to lose.

Chapter 349

Never Letting Go Again!

The supreme commander of the base saw all the soldiers below beginning to move and only then did he turn to leave the command centre. Coming to his personal office, he acted according to his original setting and sent a situation report to the Mecha World mainframe, detailing all the orders he had given in response as well. However, the transmission channel had already been altered by the Caesarian hackers so that his report would be sent directly to the mainframe of the spaceship hidden on the base. Meanwhile, the Federation mainframe remained oblivious to everything that was happening here.



The starship had successfully shifted to high speed and was temporarily out of danger, but this risky order of the commander left Ling Lan in a sticky situation. When the commander had commanded for the ship to shift into high gear, Little Four, who had immediately grasped the information, had quickly passed on the bad news to Ling Lan.

If Ling Lan had not been too far away from the starship, the amount of time left would have been enough for Ling Lan to board the ship again. However, it just so happened that back when Ling Lan had been fighting the Caesarian ace operator, in order to finish the other quicker, she had purposefully pretended to lose control to trick the opponent. At present, she had already fallen to about an altitude of 800 metres, almost a whole 1000 metres away from the starship's altitude of 1700 metres.

This distance cut Ling Lan's time extremely short. She operated her imperial mecha to fly at high speed towards the starship, trying to land within the ship while it still had not officially entered high gear. But just as Ling Lan was about to successfully enter a launch port of the starship, the ship managed to activate high gear and shoot forwards like an arrow, leaving Ling Lan to pounce onto empty air. The ship instantly pulled a considerable distance away from Ling Lan.

Seeing this, Ling Lan clenched her teeth and decisively pushed the imperial mecha to its maximum speed, which was the mecha's overdrive. Overdrive mode was typically

in a sealed state and would not be readily activated, because running in overdrive was a great burden on a mecha's engines. The energy consumed per second was no less than when firing a heavy energy projectile cannon. Not only that, overdrive would also take a high toll on the operator's body.

The reason Ling Lan had not activated overdrive mode from the start was because she was afraid her body would not be able to bear it. At the same time, she was placing her hopes on the long shot that she would be able to successfully board the starship by only using high speed. Unexpectedly, all of her cautions was for naught in the end. However, presented with the dire situation of having to stay behind at the Swift Dragon base if she did not use overdrive, Ling Lan naturally would not hesitate any longer!

She needed to board the ship successfully before the starship broke through the atmospheric layer. Otherwise, based on the mecha's power and mobility alone, she would not be able to escape the gravity of the planet to fly into outer space. Even though Ling Lan was currently piloting an imperial mecha, it was still out of the question unless Ling Lan was controlling a god-class mecha. Frankly, even if an imperial mecha could fly into outer space, Ling Lan's current level of strength and physical constitution would not allow her to sustain long periods of cross-level operation anyway...

This time, Ling Lan's caution taught her a bloody lesson. She understood now that she needed to apply her full strength in all things from now on and not put her hopes on luck and chance, otherwise she might have to pay an even greater price.

Time was running out bit by bit. Ling Lan's mecha came closer and closer to the starship. 100 metres, 50 metres, 30 metres, 20 metres, 10 metres... she saw the number countdown of the 5-minute limit she set for herself to operate in overdrive dwindling smaller and smaller, and cold sweat poured uncontrollably from her forehead. For the first time, she felt how truly helpless she was.

She clearly only needed to speed up a little more to wrap her hand around that handle at the outermost edge of the final launch port of the starship, but no matter how hard she tried, she just could not close that final bit of distance. Meanwhile, the x192 high-glazed nuclear power source had also begun to emit the red lights warning that its power was about to run out... could it be that she was still going to fail in the end and be unable to leave the Swift Dragon base? A bad feeling coursed through Ling Lan's heart.

What made Ling Lan even more nervous was the fact that she had begun to feel pain in her body. It started with minor cramps, which slowly turned into an acute ripping sort of pain. It looked like the feedback force of cross-level operation had already seriously impacted her body, and with the passage of time, her condition was only getting worse.

Just as Ling Lan was beginning to despair, a voice suddenly rang out in her mecha's comms, "Rabbit, come on!"

Ling Lan's spirits rallied. She raised her head and saw the figure of a familiar mecha appear at the tail end of the launch port. It was the leopard — with one hand on the handle, he reached his other hand out towards Ling Lan, attempting to grab hold of her mecha.

Seeing the leopard, Ling Lan's heart fluttered and she stretched out her right arm with determination. Her companions had not abandoned her, so why was she giving up hope? Without fearing the acute pain coming from all over her body, Ling Lan pushed her mecha's engines till they were working on overload. Ling Lan's mecha's speed boosted even further and her hand came closer and closer to the leopard's outstretched hand. Five metres, three metres, one metre...

"Argh..." Ling Lan let out an unwilling scream. The x192 high-glazed nuclear power source finally fizzled out — Ling Lan pushed forwards at that final moment, reaching out with a desperate hand, and the two mecha's fingers were linked for a moment before slipping apart. Ling Lan's mecha lost all mobility and fell out of her control...

"Rabbit..." Ling Lan could almost hear the leopard's mournful wail. She had failed, hadn't she? However, as long as the leopard passed the document to the city lord of Grandsweep City, their mission would be complete. Even if she remained at the Swift Dragon base, it would not affect the formation of the clan.

Ling Lan closed her eyes, resigned, and just as she was about to give up, she suddenly felt her mecha being grabbed hold of by some external force, stopping it from falling. Stunned, she opened her eyes and found that the leopard had already grasped her mecha's right hand with both of his hands...

"Rabbit, I will never let go again," said Li Lanfeng with a smile. His words had a double meaning — even as he said this to Ling Lan, he was also saying this to himself. He would never again let go of this friendship like he had seven years ago due to

miscellaneous reasons.

Li Lanfeng's words puzzled Ling Lan. She saw Li Lanfeng's hands wrapped around her own right hand and could not help but feel her heart skip a beat. Could it be that the leopard had jumped off the starship? Deciding not to leave for her sake?

Ling Lan's emotions were instantly in turmoil. For the first time, someone was willing to brave danger for her... but Ling Lan's sentimentality only lasted for a moment. Cool logic once again reasserted itself, and she instantly realised that the two of them were not falling rapidly but had been tethered by some force and was flying swiftly upwards with the starship.

Ling Lan turned to look unerringly behind the leopard and saw that the two legs of his mecha were currently caught securely in the hands of Qi Long's mecha...

"Yo, Boss, it's rare to see you in such a predicament." Qi Long's laughter rang out in Ling Lan's comms, and Ling Lan's heart relaxed as joy stole over her. Even though she was brimming with emotions, accustomed to being as cold as ice, she could only respond dispassionately, "Yes, are you very satisfied by this?"

Ling Lan's cool demeanour strangled Qi Long's laughter, and he felt a chill invade his heart. He could not help but shudder — if his hands had not remained steady, this shudder may have spelled great trouble.

Qi Long was silently regretful — how could he forget that his boss was a cold and ruthless person who would take revenge for the slightest grievance? Qi Long could already foresee that when they got back, he would be captured by his boss for some brutal torment in the private training rooms... Boo hoo hoo, his little life was surely forfeit.

"Boss, even in such a predicament you are still the most handsomest boss!" Qi Long tried to salvage the situation and alter his impending tragic fate. He feebly tried to suck up to his boss, but in his panic, his skill at flattery fell short of its usual standard, actually missing its mark completely ¹.

"Ho ho, so I am the most handsome when I'm in a sorry state like this, eh?" The corners of Ling Lan's lips tilted up subtly as she responded levelly, though she was actually in a very happy mood. These were her companions — at crucial moments, they would run over to protect her... Alright, at this moment, the leopard's figure had once again

been relegated to the recesses of Ling Lan's mind.

Ling Lan's words made Qi Long almost want to slap himself. Why was he so stupid? Actually reminding Boss about what he said wrong to begin with...

In the end, it was still Han Jijyun who took pity on his sworn brother and tugged Qi Long away, helping him out by saying, "Quickly, everyone help out and pull Boss back in."

It turned out that all the other members were here as well. Luo Lang and Han Jijyun were right behind Qi Long, each with one hand holding onto Qi Long firmly. Meanwhile, Xie Yi and Lin Zhong-qing were standing behind Luo Lang and Han Jijyun and holding onto them in turn.

Why had they appeared here at this opportune moment? The facts of the matter were...

Before the starship had shifted into high speed, while Ling Lan was working hard to approach and board the starship, Little Four had been secretly controlling the starship and had surreptitiously opened the launch port at the tail end. The Federation soldiers in the ship's control room were completely ignorant of this series of actions, but Qi Long and the others who had been waiting all this while in the hold at the tail end immediately noticed. They saw the launch port which had been shut all this time finally open up, and it went without saying that it was definitely their boss returning.

But before they could rejoice, the subsequent events not only caused Ling Lan to miss the chance to board the ship, they also left Qi Long and the others dumbfounded. The starship had suddenly shifted into high gear and sent the unprepared group tumbling. Fortunately, they had all still been in their mecha, so even though they had been thrown about terribly and things had been a little awkward, they had not incurred any great injury. Any minor injuries they had suffered had been quickly handled by Li Shiyu.

By the time they had stabilised their own mecha, they discovered that they could see no sign of Boss. Qi Long and the others knew then that their boss must not have caught up to the ship in time. They were instantly filled with worry and anxiety, but they also did not know what to do at that moment in time.

And then, Li Lanfeng, who had been silent all this while, suddenly retrieved the

document from his bag and handed it to Qi Long, saying, "Qi Long, I want to go check things out at the launch port. It may be dangerous over there... I'll leave this document in your care."

Qi Long immediately refused and said, "This is a task Boss entrusted to you. I cannot go against Boss's orders. Besides, I should be the one to go through the tail-end's passage."

Qi Long's direct refusal made Li Lanfeng fall silent. He merely shoved the document at Qi Long outright and before Qi Long could react, Li Lanfeng had already turned away and left.

By the time Qi Long realised what had happened, Li Lanfeng had already disappeared through the first set of doors leading to the tunnel. Speechless, he held onto the document and glanced over at his surrounding companions, and then he decisively shoved the document at the still stunned Chang Xinyuan.

This move of Qi Long's startled Chang Xinyuan, who instantly asked in a panic, "Why... give it to me?"

Chapter 350

Flee the Base!

"You, have the worst control skills out of the entire team. As a safety precaution, you just stay put and guard these documents properly. If, in this situation, you still mess up and get yourself killed, your sorry ass had better not even dream of joining us, the Lingtian clan," Qi Long threatened aggressively.

This speech left Chang Xinyuan burning with embarrassment. He meant to snap back but found that Qi Long's words rang true, and at that moment he was actually left dumbstruck.

As soon as Qi Long was done speaking, without even considering how Chang Xinyuan would react to his words, he gestured with a wide sweep of his hand for his teammates to leave the mecha hold and then sprinted towards the launch port. Qi Long was actually feeling agitated and worried, not knowing what fate had befallen his boss. He had long thought of travelling to the tail end of the ship to check out the situation for himself, but alas, Li Lanfeng had beaten him to the punch...

At this thought, Qi Long started to grumble about Li Lanfeng in his heart. This fellow really knew how to put on a hell of a show, never missing an opportunity to increase the Boss's awareness of him. Although Qi Long had some quibbles with Li Lanfeng, deep in his heart he held great admiration for him, because only someone who truly held Boss Lan in such high esteem could have this calibre of performance.

The minute Qi Long moved, Luo Lang, Han Jijyun, and the others followed suit. In fact, if it had not been for Boss Lan's previous instruction for them to obey Qi Long's orders the whole way, they would have rushed to the tail end of the ship long ago, unable to contain themselves.

The last one to leave was Li Shiyu, who, before he left, shot a glance at the stupefied Chang Xinyuan who was frozen in place. Sighing softly, he changed directions to walk over to Chang Xinyuan's side, patted him on the shoulder, and said, "Don't overthink it. Qi Long's orders are out of consideration for you. Just trust him and follow his orders. In fact, I think he's right, your control really is a little weak. At the tail end, if there is any danger, it will be difficult for you to even protect yourself. So you might as

well stay put here and protect this vital document well."

Chang Xinyuan cast a mournful eye at Li Shiyu. Was this how a teammate from the same battle clan was like? Could he not pick at the scabs on his soul? Could they still get along with each other happily? Chang Xinyuan suddenly found that Li Shiyu, who seemed like such a kind-hearted, nice guy, absolutely had the potential to be a black-bellied person.

Li Shiyu could not know the complaints Chang Xinyuan had in his heart, because right after he was done speaking, he had swiftly chased after Qi Long and the others. Frankly, even though he did not like Ling Lan that much, Ling Lan's actions all this way had still obtained his acknowledgement. He too did not want anything bad to happen to this team leader who looked out for his team members at every turn. Thus, he was also planning to go check things out at the tail end with the rest.

Only Chang Xinyuan was left in the entire mecha hold. He looked down at the document in his hands and sighed in resignation, then carefully tucked the document away in his bag. Like Li Shiyu had said, this document was vital — it would determine whether their team would be able to successfully establish a battle clan, so there was no room for error.

Chang Xinyuan knew deep down that Qi Long words had not been out of contempt for him, otherwise the other would not have placed such an important mission item in his care. In fact, Qi Long's distribution of tasks was extremely appropriate considering the situation. Someone from their team had to live to submit the document and complete the mission, and for safety reasons, this person needed to remain in the mecha hold and avoid danger.

Although Chang Xinyuan had not joined the team for long, he could clearly see the deep bonds between Qi Long and the others and Boss Lan. Their relationship was not the typical friendship and comradery between team members, but was more similar to the blood ties of family. Chang Xinyuan believed that if Boss Lan met with any misfortune and ended up stranded at the Swift Dragon base, Qi Long and the others would likely choose to leave the ship and remain at the Swift Dragon base as well even if they would die for their choice. They would want to go through thick and thin with their boss...

At this point, Chang Xinyuan could not help but envy the deep brotherly bonds between Boss Lan and Qi Long and the others. If possible, he too wanted to be a part

of that, advancing and retreating alongside Boss Lan and Qi Long and the rest. However, having the worst mecha control skills, he had ultimately been selected by Qi Long to be the one to stay here to ensure the mission would be completed. And there was nothing at all he could say to argue against the decision.

This was because Chang Xinyuan was well aware that the Swift Dragon base was rife with danger. Now exposed, deep within the Swift Dragon base, they would definitely have to fight ferociously and cut a path of blood through the base to have any chance of survival. Thus, those who followed Qi Long must be very good at combat, otherwise it would be pointless to go and they may even create trouble for Boss Lan. Chang Xinyuan was very clear on this point. This was why he had remained silent and had resigned himself to accepting Qi Long's arrangement in the end, becoming the person left behind to safeguard the document.

Frankly, Chang Xinyuan was unwilling, because he did not want to be the member left behind. This made him feel very useless.

"Weakest control skills, eh? If I want to stand next to Boss Lan and not get tossed aside, only relying on my modification innate talent is far from enough. I must become stronger, and be like Lin Zhong-qing and Li Shiyu. Even as a support member, I have to become the most formidable one..." Chang Xinyuan clenched his fists silently, determination flashing in his eyes. Never again would he be so naive as to truly believe, as he did before, that modification was everything.

Having maintained a breakneck speed the whole way, Li Lanfeng was the first to reach the launch port at the tail end. As he reached the mouth of the port, the scene that unfolded was that of Ling Lan piloting a mecha, desperately trying to catch up to the starship. At present, he was about 10 metres away and looked like he could board successfully soon enough. However, Li Lanfeng then noticed that Ling Lan's mecha's power supply seemed slightly unstable, as if it was almost depleted. The mecha was also unable to maintain a steady speed, speeding up and slowing down erratically, which prevented Ling Lan from closing the gap.

Thus, despite his delight at seeing the rabbit here, Li Lanfeng could not help but feel his heart in his throat, fearing that the rabbit would not catch up in the end. With a glance at the outer area of the launch port, he realized that the outermost rim was lined with handles, probably support structures to help mecha flying at high speed to land quickly on the starship. As he brought his mecha to the entrance, it was promptly sucked out of the starship by a tremendous force. In that instant, he gripped tightly on

to one of those handles, simultaneously activating the adhesion mechanism on his feet to secure his mecha's position.

Having done all that, Li Lanfeng activated his comms link and roared, "Rabbit, come on!" as he daringly stretched his body out, right hand outstretched to its limits, reaching with all his might for Rabbit's mecha, so close yet so far.

The rabbit must have heard him, because Li Lanfeng saw him stretch his own right hand towards him, intent on catching Li Lanfeng's hand...

The two great metal arms were inching closer, but just before they could catch each other, the roaring engines of the rabbit's mecha suddenly died. Even though the rabbit had put all his energy into a final surge forward at that final moment, allowing them to link fingers, the immense weight of the mecha and the recoil from the high-speed flight was not something their fingers could bear. Their fingers were only linked for a moment before they were instantly flung apart.

As Li Lanfeng witnessed the rabbit's mecha stalling and about to plummet, without even thinking about it, he slammed the controls causing the mecha to leap forwards, bursting out from the starship's launch port to tightly clasp the right arm of the rabbit's mecha the second before it started to fall...

"Rabbit, I will never let go again," was all Li Lanfeng remembered saying with a smile. He knew the true meaning behind his words — Seven years ago, he had chosen to abandon the rabbit, but from now on, he was never letting go again!

Just as Li Lanfeng thought that he and the rabbit would fall down to Swift Dragon base and have to brave life and death together, he felt his mecha being tethered by a great force. His and the rabbit's mecha were suspended below the starship and were quickly being lifted upwards. It turned out that at that crucial moment, Qi Long and the others had made it in time to catch his mecha by the feet with lightning speed.

Like links in a chain, Qi Long's mecha was tightly held onto by Luo Lang and Han Jijyun, while behind them were Xie Yi and Lin Zhong-qing. The four of them each had one fist firmly wrapped around one of the support handles on the launch port walls, forcibly negating the downward momentum of Li Lanfeng's and the rabbit's mecha.

Han Jijyun was about to signal for all of them to haul Li Lanfeng and Rabbit back to the starship when Li Shiyu appeared as well. With his help, Qi Long was finally able to pull

Li Lanfeng back on board, ultimately succeeding in dragging Ling Lan back onto the starship.

Ling Lan, who had only just narrowly escaped disaster, had just entered the starship when she barked out, "To the hold, now!" She charged ahead, leading the clan members back to the mecha hold in the tail end, acting on Little Four's information that the starship was about to breach the atmospheric layer. For any of the unsecured and underpowered mecha, remaining in the launch port at that moment would be absolutely suicidal.

Everyone stampeded towards the mecha hold as Little Four swiftly closed seal after seal behind them. When Chang Xinyuan, who had been waiting safely in his secured seat, saw Boss Lan make it into the mecha hold ahead of the rest, he was overcome with emotion. He instantly cried out, "Boss Lan, you're back!"

Before Ling Lan could reply, the starship started to shudder violently. Except for Chang Xinyuan, who was untroubled due to his being firmly planted on the secured seat, everyone was sent stumbling by the violent vibrations.

"Fall flat!" Everyone's comms channels rang with the sound of Ling Lan's sharp command, and they immediately got into a prone position. The cacophony of mecha clanging against mecha ensued in the hold. If the entire starship hadn't already been quaking uncontrollably, the noise they made would definitely have caught the attention of the Federation soldiers in the main control room.

At that very moment in the main control room, all the Federation soldiers were anxiously hunched over and gripping the control panel before them. The juddering from breaching the atmosphere was extremely powerful — people of lower physical fitness stood no chance of adapting to it. Of course, the reason they suffered so greatly was because the starship did not have sufficient power. In order to ensure that the starship could successfully break out of the Swift Dragon base's atmospheric layer, they had no choice but to conserve every ounce of energy and that meant not activating the starship's anti-shock mechanisms, which left them no choice but to grit their teeth and persevere through it all.

Close to 5 minutes of violent juddering almost caused all of the Federation soldiers in the main control room to be severely injured enough to spew blood. Finally, the starship wrested free of the base's gravity, successfully leaping into outer space. Only then did the violent shaking stop, becoming incomparably stable. Sensing that the

situation was now stable, the Federation soldiers stood up straight again. However, their complexions were very pale — the intense tremors may not have hurt them seriously, but their bodies had still been unable to bear the shock well. They would probably need a stretch of time to recover from this once they returned.

Chapter 351

Mission Reward!

The commander suppressed the roiling blood and qi in his chest and took in a deep breath before commanding once more, "Shift to low gear immediately." He still remembered that the ship was running low on power — it wouldn't do to exhaust all their power. Although they had already come out to the starry skies, temporarily escaping the Swift Dragon base, the commander knew that in outer space, the Swift Dragon fleet still had several ships on duty patrolling the area. If they happened to bump into those ships by chance, as a ship without power, they would definitely be at the other's mercy. Having gone through so much trouble to escape from the Swift Dragon base, he did not want to die here now and be stranded back at the Swift Dragon base again.

The team member responsible for shifting gears immediately pulled the speed control back to low gear. The starship's power had already fallen to 70% at present — if they had been a minute slower in charging through the atmospheric layer, they would most likely have been dragged by gravity back to the Swift Dragon base due to running out of power. Just entertaining the possibility sent chills down everyone's spines.

Shifting to low gear, the starship began to slowly cruise through the starry skies, accumulating power as it went along. They needed to store up 100% power as soon as they could, and then leave this place at high speed. As the commander waited for the power to accumulate, he could not help but pray that their luck would hold out so they would not bump into any of the patrol ships of the Swift Dragon base. Of course, he also hoped that the ships on the ground would not ascend so quickly; otherwise, up against the dozens of warships of the Swift Dragon fleet, they would have no chance at all of escaping.

It should be said that the luck of the commander's group was decent. Before they were at full power again, they were not discovered by any of the Swift Dragon patrol ships. About 10 minutes later, the starship was back at 100%, and then it flew rapidly towards the central district.

Twenty minutes later, the Swift Dragon fleet successfully rose into the air. Thirty

military vessels of various sizes made up the Swift Dragon fleet. The fleet began to search for clues to the whereabouts of the hijacked starship. Unfortunately, they found nothing useful. This frustrated the fleet's captain — as long as a ship had been through the area, it would definitely leave some trace of energy behind, but there was nothing of the sort in this planetary sector. It was as if the starship that had lifted into the air thirty minutes ago had never existed.

With no clues, the Swift Dragon fleet could only resort to the crude method of searching in the general direction of the central district. This slowed them down significantly, allowing the starship moving in high gear to pull further away from them.

The primary hero who had obscured their tracks from the Swift Dragon fleet was Little Four. Without requiring any instruction from Ling Lan, Little Four had scrambled the locations the starship had passed through. In other words, it would be impossible for the devices on the warships to track their flight path.

This was part of Little Four's abilities. He could render advanced high-tech equipment useless or mess up their readings. Of course, he could only affect the Swift Dragon fleet's devices so thoroughly because Ling Lan's group was currently in the virtual world. If this were in the real world, Little Four might not be able to achieve such a godly effect.

With Little Four helping from the shadows, the starship would detect the enemy's presence before it could encounter any patrol ships of the Swift Dragon fleet. Thus, the commander had enough time to employ evasion measures to avoid the enemy's detection. The commander was rather baffled — why would the radar scanner on this ship be better than those of the other ships in the same fleet? — but unable to find an answer, he could only ascribe it to their luck being better in the end. Their radar had just functioned at its maximum capacity right whenever they needed it to.

In this manner, the entire journey was fraught with tension but there was no actual danger. The starship finally left the Nebula district and entered the next planetary sector. Although they had yet to arrive at the central district, this still proved that they had successfully escaped the pursuit of the Swift Dragon fleet. The Swift Dragon fleet did not have the authorisation to enter another planetary sector.

However, it was similarly very dangerous for them. After all, the warship they had appropriated to bring them here was also a ship belonging to the Swift Dragon base. Still, those Federation soldiers in the main control room specially sent here by the

mainframe had a special way of contacting the mainframe. The moment they were out of the Nebula Boundary, which was no longer under the mainframe's control, they were able to make contact with the mainframe.

After receiving news, the mainframe arranged for them to enter the central district via a special flight route, green-lighted the whole way through to bring them straight into the district. If not for this approved special flight route, as they continued flying forwards, they would have been mercilessly shot down if they were detected by any patrolling fleet. The Federation soldiers naturally would not do such a stupid thing.

Finally, the starship safely arrived at the central district, landing in one of the planet's cities at the outermost region of the central district. As long as they touched down here, they would be able to log out of the virtual world and report directly to military headquarters about the situation at the Swift Dragon base. Perhaps out of their urgency to report, the soldiers disembarked and left in a hurry without carefully inspecting the insides of the ship.

Ling Lan's group took the chance to slip out from the starship. They were dressed in the standard combat uniform of the Federation, disguised as NPCs. Under Little Four's guidance, they evaded all the surveillance systems of the spaceport, silently left to the military spaceport, and returned to the city.

The moment they entered the city, it was back to a world of mecha. This made Ling Lan feel that they had truly returned to Mecha World... Ling Lan's team of nine swiftly changed into their individual mecha and joined the bustling crowd of mecha. Ling Lan and the others pretended to sightsee in the city, and then they drifted naturally over to a transportation array. Selecting the city they wanted, they left the area. They did not leave any trace to show they had ever been to this city, because all of their figures along the way had been wiped off the surveillance systems by Little Four.

They finally arrived at Grandsweep City and Ling Lan retrieved the document from [No Mecha Unrepaired]. Although she had her own copy, things that should be covered up should still be properly covered up. Getting to the city lord's manor of Grandsweep City took a little time, and upon arriving there, they once again sought out the city lord.

The city lord of Grandsweep City thought that Ling Lan was here to plead with him to revoke the SSS-rank mission. Besides that, he already had a bad impression of Ling Lan from the start, so his attitude was extremely cold and unfriendly.

Ling Lan was not someone who liked to make nice with people. In the learning space, everything the instructors taught was all based on true strength. Therefore, she too did not waste time with any nonsense, directly shoving the document in her hands to the city lord. Er... that attitude really could not be called respectful...

This behaviour of Ling Lan's was obviously rather impolite in the city lord's eyes. His brow furrowed, but before he could speak, he felt an alert being transmitted from his hand — he was holding a key item which marked the completion of the SSS-rank mission. The city lord's expression shifted and he read intently through the document in his hands. Only when he was done did he lift his head to look at Ling Lan again. There was shock in his gaze, as well as some unconcealable excitement.

This expression of the city lord's finally vented the frustration Ling Lan had carried all this time. It looked like what her instructors had said was right. As long as you had enough strength, even those people who looked down on you at first would still change their opinion of you in the end. And when your strength was far greater than the other's, you would not need to go curry favour, for others would come running to curry favour with you.

The city lord of Grandsweep City pushed down the complex jumble of emotions in his heart and quickly submitted this document up to the Mecha World mainframe. After receiving confirmation that there was no mistake, the initially austere expression of the city lord's instantly cleared up to become cheerful and affable, and he said, "[Lingtian First-String], you are truly a hero among youths. You've performed well. You are the first in Mecha World history to complete an SSS-rank mission. I am proud of you..."

As expected, the city lord's originally disdainful expression had changed; his entire persona was much more enthusiastic and friendly now. Seeing this, Ling Lan's lips tilted up at the corners. Even though her expression was as stoic as ever, she still patiently listened and waited for the city lord to finish his spiel.

The reason why Ling Lan applied patience to finish listening to the city lord was out of consideration for what had happened before. When she had come to accept the mission previously, she had only received the ultra-rare SSS-rank mission that only appeared once every hundred years because she had not gotten along well with the city lord of Grandsweep City. Ling Lan suspected that the difficulty of the mission and the mission rewards were very likely to be somewhat related to the impression the issuer of the mission had of her. Of course, Ling Lan believed that under the

mainframe's monitoring, the main rewards would not be skimmed. Still, there was sure to be some additional optional rewards that might be held back if the other was in a bad mood. If that happened, Ling Lan would be really depressed. Mind you, this SSS-rank mission had really been treacherous, almost costing them their lives to complete. Any bit of extra reward would be great.

Finally, the city lord of Grandsweep City finished his lengthy speech of encouragement, and only then did Ling Lan calmly reply, "Many thanks, City Lord. May I trouble you to bestow our final rewards?"

Seeing Ling Lan's calm composure in the face of praise, the city lord was filled with even more joy and fondness for Ling Lan. His impression of Ling Lan had truly taken a 180-degree turn — he completely forgot how he had made things difficult for Ling Lan back then, beginning to think of himself as Ling Lan's sponsor. He had already discerned how extraordinary the other was from the start, which was why he had given him this SSS-rank mission. This outcome proved that he had judged astutely to identify this hero among the masses! The city lord was internally smug...

Since this was a talent he had discovered and cultivated, how could he let the other suffer any indignity? The city lord of Grandsweep City had taken Ling Lan in as one of his own, so he decided he would give the other a great advantage. After contemplating for a moment, he announced the final reward.

Reward 1: One clan-formation certificate. Bring this certificate to the city hall to register and your battle clan will be successfully formed. Due to perfect completion of the SSS-rank mission, the battle clan shall be instantly upgraded to five stars from the initial zero stars. Starless battle clan: 6-12 clan members; 1-star battle clan, 6-18 members; 2-star: 6-24 members; 3-star: 6-30 members; 4-star: 6-38 members; 5-star: 6-50 members.

Reward 2: Due to perfect completion of the SSS-rank mission, 1 Hero's Heart Emblem (level 1) is awarded. This emblem needs to be activated by the clan leader. Once activated, the combat power of the entire clan will be increased by 10% for a duration of 10 minutes. Cooldown period: 7 days!

Reward 3: Every member of the clan can redeem a mecha above special-class and below ace-class for free. Condition: The clan member must meet the requirements to pilot the mecha to be redeemed. Time limit: Unlimited!

Reward 4: Ability to accept any mission in Mecha World (all level restrictions voided); penalty for failure cut by half!

Reward 5: Select any 10 mecha accessories or weapons from the warehouse of the city lord of Grandsweep City, as well as 10 super energy blocks, 10 mecha modification materials, and 10 other associated materials...

Reward 6: Freely choose any of the unclaimed lands within Grandsweep City to become the battle clan's main camp, which will be instantly upgraded to a 1-star camp. Twenty NPC guards gifted as a bonus, along with 4 defensive laser cannons.

Reward 7: One challenge exemption token. Allows user's clan to be exempted from being challenged by other battle clans for one year in Mecha World...

At one glance, Ling Lan could tell that the first four rewards must have been awarded by the mainframe. They were truly generous. Meanwhile, the final three rewards should be personal rewards given by the city lord of Grandsweep City. It looked like her patience earlier had paid off.

Ling Lan was not moved much right now by some of the other things the city lord had gifted them; she was all but drooling over those 10 super energy blocks. Don't blame Ling Lan for being shallow — it was just that the mission this time had completely wiped out all of the energy blocks the team had accumulated. Without these energy blocks, it could be foreseen that all the members of the team would be kept wildly busy trying to earn more energy blocks in the upcoming days. If not, they would not even be able to start their mecha.

Just one mission was enough to render Ling Lan's team this poor! At this thought, Ling Lan's heart wept!

Chapter 352

Operation Kill the Fledgling!

In a vast hidden chamber, on three large screens as large as the walls they were affixed to, nine stern-faced old men dressed in military attire were gathered. The atmosphere seemed rather tense.

"Sixteen years and after spending uncountable manpower and resources, the final outcome is a crushing defeat. Not only that, we, Caesar, have lost over 30 top-class hackers all at once, as well as 6 top-class spectres," said a grim-looking general on the screen with a document in his hands, tone displeased.

"I can only say that the Huaxians are just too sly, secretly sending over so many spectres, ruining our project-T in one fell swoop. Meanwhile, as our men were caught unprepared, they were almost utterly annihilated. If we hadn't had another hidden team lurking there, we might not have learned of what had transpired there even now." A general with a kindly appearance on the screen could only smile bitterly and say.

"According to information from above, Huaxia ¹ did not escape unscathed. One of their top-class spectres ranked in the top ten was sacrificed in this campaign..." another cold-faced general interjected.

"But our Caesar lost four top-class spectres..." the expression of a general on a different screen instantly turned dark at these words, "One Huaxian spectre is not at all enough to compensate."

"Yes, and there are still those 30 top-class hackers to account for. This campaign has almost gouged us deeply. The next time there is a virtual war, it would be very easy for us to fall into a passive position. We can't just forget this grievance," said a general from the side in agreement.

"We must make the Huaxians pay!" hollered a general at the outermost edge, face flushed with anger.

"We must make the Huaxians pay!" Another general on the same screen agreed.

"We must make the Huaxians pay!" Very soon, all of the generals were in accord.

In the centre screen, the oldest general who had been silent all this while plucked the pipe he had been smoking from where it was perched on the corner of his lips, and finally said, "It's about time for those allies of ours who want to share a piece of the pie to contribute something now. We must give the smug and complacent Huaxia a bloody lesson."

"According to the latest news from the intelligence bureau, a prodigy mecha operator has appeared in Huaxia's First Men's Military Academy. Some time ago, he managed to advance to ace operator status at just 19 years of age. He's lauded as the second coming of Ling Xiao..." At this time, a general shared the latest news he had obtained with the others.

"Ling Xiao!" When the present generals heard Ling Xiao's name, their gazes instantly became dark. Several were even gnashing their teeth as they muttered Ling Xiao's name repeatedly. It was clear to see that these generals were extremely fearful of Ling Xiao.

"We can't let Huaxia have another Ling Xiao, otherwise our Caesar will truly be down against Huaxia by a head." A general finally voiced the hidden thoughts of all the generals there.

Ling Xiao was the youngest operator to ever advance to god-class, and then he had also obtained the most well-balanced IN god-class mecha <Belief> which was considered the most powerful IN mecha by all the nations. From then on, anyone who understood the intricacies of IN god-class mecha knew that the strongest person in the human world in future would definitely be Ling Xiao without a doubt. This was also the major reason why they had conspired with other nations sixteen years ago to eliminate Ling Xiao. They could not allow Ling Xiao to grow further and become the strongest in the world. Caesar, which considered itself the strongest nation, just could not allow the strongest person to belong to another nation. That would be an absolute disgrace to them.

Unfortunately, all the effort and manipulation they invested had still been unable to eliminate Ling Xiao. Now, it would no longer be as easy to harm Ling Xiao as it had been at the start. The day Ling Xiao would become the strongest was within sight — despite their reluctance, they could only accept this fact. Still, one Ling Xiao was already the limit of their tolerance. The title of 'second Ling Xiao' had undoubtedly

triggered the neuroses of the Caesarians...

"Since Huaxia has destroyed so many of our high-end talents, we must destroy their future hope!" The oldest general in the centre screen gripped his pipe, a ruthless smile appearing on his face. "The First Men's Military Academy of Huaxia... Hmph, did the Huaxians really think they could conceal him away so perfectly?"

The old general's words made the eyes of all the other generals light up. Unified in their decision, the nine great generals very quickly formulated their revenge plot. They called this action plan — Operation Kill the Fledgling!



Right then, the Huaxia Federation was unaware that danger was about to befall the First Men's Military Academy which they had always taken so much pains to keep concealed and secreted away. Military headquarters knew the Swift Dragon base had been occupied by an unidentified faction, and that there were even many spectres there. In order to ensure the stability of the virtual world, Huaxia had dispatched a fleet along with as many as ten spectres, with three of those being spectres ranked in the top ten. With the commander who had escaped from the Swift Dragon base leading them, they had hurried towards the Swift Dragon base.

But during this period of coming and going, the Caesarians lurking in the Swift Dragon base had managed to retreat. Only after finding the surviving adjutant did they learn that this group of people had come from the Caesar Empire. The Huaxia Federation was livid. They raised a serious protest to Caesar, but the Caesar Empire denied all allegations, brushing it all off as slander. They had never sent any hackers or spectres to invade the virtual world of the Huaxia Federation.

The two nations began to quibble on the diplomatic front — and while the attention of everyone in the Huaxia Federation was focused on the diplomatic byplay between the two nations, several countries had begun to move surreptitiously.

All the turmoil occurring on the diplomatic front did not affect the enlistment assessments of the First Men's Military Academy. After a week of tests, the assessment at the military academy was nearing its conclusion. Each of the various great army divisions was making their final candidate choices. The number of people taken in by each division was not much — in order to obtain the best and most suitable talented cadets for their divisions, the assessors had no choice but to consider their options

again and again.

Ling Xiao's 23rd Division assessment team finally came to a consensus and passed a final shortlist of names to Ling Xiao. Ling Xiao browsed through the list casually, and then said, "That'll do."

"General, don't you want to think on it a little more?" The adjutant by his side finally could not hold back from asking.

Ling Xiao cast a puzzled glance at him and then asked with a smile, "Adjutant Qiao, what do you think? It's okay, we can study this together."

Ling Xiao was not that type of strict general — constantly smiling and affable, his subordinates always felt as if greeted by a spring breeze while with him. Even as they idolised him, they were not afraid to speak their minds.

Adjutant Qiao daringly flipped to one of the pages of the list and pointed out several names. He reminded softly, "These few people, not too long ago with Young Master Lan..." Ling Xiao peered at him with a half-smile, causing adjutant Qiao to turn red and quickly change his form of address, "With Ling Lan... they had gone up against each other in a wagered arena fight. They were defeated by Ling Lan's group. One of the members of their clan had initially applied for enlistment with our division, but ended up missing the assessment this time due to severe bodily injury. According to Major Qin Feng who assessed them, he inadvertently overheard them discussing their intentions to take revenge against Ling Lan."

Ever since knowing that Young Master Lan was the general's son, these assessment team members who had come here with the general had long taken the effort to learn all they could about everything that had happened since Young Master Lan had entered the school. When they found out that the first year New Cadet Regiment led by Young Master Lan had defeated the higher grade Leiting Mecha Clan, which was also the number one faction in the military academy, in a wagered fight, they could not help but be proud. As expected of the son of their god-class operator General Ling Xiao — already so strong at such a young age.

Ling Lan had been fully accepted by them — this made their hearts lean infinitely towards Ling Lan's side. Even if Huo Zhenyu and his group were indeed some rare talents, the very idea that those boys were planning to retaliate against Ling Lan several years later made the men rather unhappy. If not for their ethics as soldiers

preventing them from being biased and abusing their power, they would have long swept those boys out from the list.

In the end, they still included them in the final shortlist, but they still felt disgruntled about it. This was also one of the reasons why Adjutant Qiao had brought the issue up with General Ling Xiao.

At these words, Ling Xiao could not help but laugh, "Isn't this great?"

Ling Xiao's words left Adjutant Qiao speechless, unsure what his general meant by them.

"I'm still afraid that when Ling Lan joins my division later on, you uncles will take care of him too much. Without any challenge or competition, he might become slack," mused Ling Xiao, "With these people around, it'll make things a little more difficult for him. A greenhouse cannot foster strong sprouts ²."

After saying this, Ling Xiao glanced at the adjutant with a half-smile and added, "In our 23rd Division, there is no such thing as privilege or status. No matter who they are, everyone has to start from the beginning and go through all the necessary tests and trials. No one is exempt. If these people truly have the skills, then cultivation should be given as appropriate. Don't manipulate things in any way. If in future, Ling Lan is really bullied by them, that would just prove that he isn't strong enough. What right does he have to say anything if he loses?"

Adjutant Qiao was startled by the knowing look in Ling Xiao's eyes; it was as if he had been seen through. His back was instantly coated in cold sweat, and he could only console himself desperately by telling himself that he was overthinking things. Hearing what Ling Xiao said, he quickly nodded repeatedly in agreement, no longer daring to say more.

After obtaining Ling Xiao's final approval, Adjutant Qiao swiftly departed from Ling Xiao's living quarters to hand the list over to the military academy. Tomorrow, this name list would be announced along with the name lists of all the other divisions on the official web page of the First Men's Military Academy. This also marked the end of their assessment tasks here. After one rest day, they would leave the First Men's Military Academy.

Ling Xiao watched indifferently as the adjutant left, a trace of coldness in his eyes.

When he turned to return to his room to rest, he found his official bodyguard, Lin Zhengnan, staring at him with a serious look on his youthful face. His gaze was filled with rage and disapproval. At the sight of him, Ling Xiao could not help but quirk a brow and ask, "Lil' Lin, you have something to say?"

"Adjutant Qiao's behaviour earlier was obviously fishy. Why do you still trust him this much, General?" Being able to become Ling Xiao's personal bodyguard was his luck and fortune. Since he was small, he had always idolised Ling Xiao, wanting to become Ling Xiao's left or right arm, his most trusted subordinate.

Many times, Lin Zhengnan could tell that Adjutant Qiao's actions were obviously intended to mislead Ling Xiao, trying to get Ling Xiao to do something disreputable, such as abusing his power for personal reasons. Young as he was, he could no longer refrain from speaking up and asking the general he revered like a god about the matter...

Chapter 353

A Father's Responsibility!

Ling Xiao could not help but laugh at Lin Zhengnan's words. He did not respond until he passed by Lin Zhengnan on his way to his room. Reaching out a hand to ruffle the other's hair, his tone was fond but resigned as he said, "Brat, you're oversimplifying the issue..."

The young were truly hot-blooded and saw things in black and white. But in the field, how could things be that simple? In the past, he too had not wanted to compromise and go with the flow, but the outcome of that was a whole 16-year separation from his family. At this thought, Ling Xiao's brow furrowed slightly... but if they still believed he was the same Ling Xiao as before, then they would be mistaken!

Behind him, Lin Zhengnan touched his own hair in stunned amazement. He never expected his beloved and revered sir general to actually rub his head so affectionately. Excited, he looked respectfully at the figure of Ling Xiao in the distance; he did not notice that passing cold glint in Ling Xiao's eyes.

Outside the room, a hidden guard concealed in the shadows saw the interaction between Ling Xiao and Lin Zhengnan, and a trace of envy flashed through his eyes. He too was an admirer of Ling Xiao ¹. As for Lin Zhengnan's idiotic behaviour, the hidden guard could only sigh internally though he was also happy for Lin Zhengnan. Only General Ling Xiao would have the good temperament needed to accommodate Lin Zhengnan's brash and blunt character. If it had been any of the other generals, Lin Zhengnan would definitely have been mercilessly kicked aside, because he was sure to cause trouble someday.

After returning to his room, Ling Xiao sat alone quietly on his sofa. His mind, however, was busy recalling the things his daughter had told him two days ago, as well as that confession document she had secretly sent to him. Every time he thought of these things, his heart would clench with fear. If anything had happened, he would have lost his daughter completely.

Back when he had first heard that Ling Lan had received an SSS-rank mission, he had only been astonished at his daughter's horrible luck. Unwilling to see the defeated

expression of his daughter after failing, and also because he wanted to increase his daughter's chances of success, he had gifted his only transferrable imperial mecha <Wind's Shadow> to Ling Lan, just in case.

If he had known earlier that the Swift Dragon base had been successfully infiltrated by people from the Caesar Empire, he would definitely have stopped his daughter from going on that godd*mn mission. Fortunately, there had still been an investigation team sent by the Federation military travelling along with them, and the team not only had top-class hackers but also several top-class spectres. They succeeded in drawing the attention of the Caesarians, so his daughter had managed to take advantage of that.

It had to be said that his daughter's luck at accepting missions was really terrible, but her luck in recruiting talent was off the charts. She had actually managed to recruit a spectre hiding in the civilian world and a top-class hacker (Ling Lan had told a small lie here) — and on top of that, her entire team was basically made up of advanced mecha warriors, and so possessed decent combat power. Under such dire circumstances, they had still managed to complete the mission successfully. They had obtained detailed information on the enemy, and had even managed to help the Federation investigation team from the shadows to wipe out all the Caesarian spectres. After that, they had also successfully snuck into the escape ship to return with the Federation soldiers.

When Ling Lan had told him these things, Ling Xiao was actually extremely proud, but he was also filled with fear. If anything had gone wrong at all, the result would have been utter annihilation. Even Ling Xiao could not help but admire the sheer audacity of his daughter.

Still, the outcome of the entire adventure was perfect, and the rewards they received upon its completion was also substantial. For his daughter's battle clan to leap up in one shot from starless to 5-star, it could be said to have 'ascended the skies with one step'. This rank within Mecha World was absolutely enough to place them within the top 100 battle clans.

Of course, Ling Lan's battle clan was currently no match for those battle clans at the topmost level. After all, those battle clans were all clans of old beasts that had been established for several decades already. Ling Xiao's battle clan used to be one of them, but now, unfortunately, those clan members of his from back then had all either died in battle or had left the Federation. Ling Xiao's battle clan now merely had the empty title of battle clan; it was no longer a true battle clan.

After finding out about all this, Ling Xiao had asked Ling Lan to utterly bury this incident at the bottom of her mind and tell no one. This was not only for Ling Lan's protection but also to protect that civilian hacker and spectre that had slipped past the military's radar.

At the same time, this incident made Ling Xiao realise that his daughter's ability to attract trouble was several magnitudes greater than his own. Back when he had done this clan-formation mission, he had at most caused a great furore in an enemy nation's territory, hacking up some ace operators and calling it a day. In contrast, his daughter had actually directly obliterated a whole batch of the Caesar Empire's top-class hackers and spectres... the Caesar Empire must really be feeling the pain of their losses this time.

It looks like he'll have to have to become even stronger, or else he may really be unable to protect this powerful daughter of his who seems capable of even provoking the heavens! At this thought, Ling Xiao could not help but smile. So this was the duty of being a father — it was troubling but also so sweet and blissful that he welcomed it willingly.

Over these past two days, Ling Xiao had seemed to be idling about doing nothing, appearing unbelievably casual and at ease, but he had in fact begun secretly investigating the movements of the Caesar Empire with the secret forces of the Ling family. At the same time, he had also ordered the 23rd Division to closely monitor the movements of the various army divisions of Caesar. Unfortunately, nothing useful had come out of all this over the last two days. This made Ling Xiao feel rather uneasy. Understanding how the Caesar Empire operated, he knew that the other party absolutely would not take this affront quietly and let it go. They would definitely come for their revenge...

Even though Ling Lan had told him that her team's involvement had not been exposed during the fight with Caesar, Ling Xiao was still worried that the powerful intelligence bureau of the Caesar Empire would still be able to dig up information on his daughter...

"Leaving tomorrow? If only we were staying for a couple more days." Ling Xiao suddenly felt that he did not have enough time. If he had a few more days here, he could perhaps be able to create some defences. At this thought, he could not help but sigh silently. "I hope I'm just worrying for nothing."

The night passed without a word. Early the next day, all of the students of the military

academy were eagerly refreshing the official forums of the First Men's Military Academy. They wanted to get first-hand information on the results of the division assessments...

Even the freshmen were included in this frenzy because for the top three of each division's recruits, the video of their assessments would be publicised. This could perhaps give them juniors some experience. Though they knew that this was likely just their own wishful thinking — every year's assessment was not the same — the juniors of the lower years still held onto that sense of 'what if' and would go watch these assessment videos.

"Congratulations, Boss Huo!" Qiao Ting, who had already managed to get onto the official forums, sent a congratulatory message to Huo Zhenyu at first notice. Although he was rather surprised by the other's choice of enlisting with the 23rd Division and not the 1st Division as the other had previously determined, Boss Huo had still become the top recruit of the 23rd Division. As expected of their Leiting's previous regiment commander.

"Many thanks, Junior Qiao." Huo Zhenyu was also extremely happy with his results. At the same time, he saw that the others of his battle clan had also succeeded in getting into the 23rd Division. This meant that aside from the injured Nie Feng-ming who was still in recovery, every other member was in. By next year, once Nie Feng-ming succeeded in enlisting as well, their entire battle clan would be complete.

"It's just that we've lost the arena fight against the New Cadet Regiment, so in future, Junior Qiao will have to clean up the mess." After some thought, Huo Zhenyu added, "Beware of the regiment commander of the New Cadet Regiment, Ling Lan. He is really very strong."

"I believe that, when it comes to mecha combat, I will not lose to anyone," responded Qiao Ting solemnly. He knew Boss Huo was speaking out of good intentions, worried about the future clash between Leiting and the New Cadet Regiment. Therefore, he too answered Boss Huo seriously, telling the other that he had nothing to worry about.

Huo Zhenyu was silent for a moment before answering, "Junior Qiao, it's good that you are confident." He had no way of telling Qiao Ting that the feeling Ling Lan gave him was one of unfathomable depth. In the end, all he wanted to say was reduced to just this — even as he acknowledged Qiao Ting's statement, he was trying to give himself some confidence.

Meanwhile, in Ling Lan's villa, Qi Long and the others were also refreshing the forums. Of course, their attention was focused on the 23rd Division because that was their boss's father's division and was likely their future destination.

"Aaaaaaaah, I did not expect Uncle Ling to take in Huo Zhenyu's gang..." Qi Long was the first to see the results, instantly clicking onto the 23rd Division to see its final acceptance name list. Those few familiar names sent him howling uncontrollably.

As Ling Xiao was Boss Lan's father, even though Ling Xiao's actual age was much younger than their own fathers, they still chose to respectfully call him Uncle Ling. Lying on the sofa, reading the information on the various open and hidden factions within the Ling family her father had given to her, when Ling Lan heard the address of 'Uncle Ling', her stony, cold face could not help but spasm. Alright, just imagining it — her father's young face really clashed with this title of 'uncle'.

"What's so surprising about that? Other than being no match for our Boss Lan, Huo Zhenyu's physical skills are the best in the whole military academy." Seeing these results, Han Jijyun was not surprised.

"I just can't figure out why he chose to enlist with the 23rd Division," said Qi Long as he rubbed his head, baffled. From the gossip Xie Yi had gathered, Huo Zhenyu was an admirer of the First Marshal — he had long ago sworn to apply for enlistment with the 1st Division.

"Perhaps because the commander of the 23rd Division is Uncle Ling Xiao," remarked Luo Lang, face filled with admiration. "In future, I too want to apply for the 23rd Division..." That said, Luo Lang suddenly realised that his boss had not stated which division he would be applying to yet. So, he quickly asked his boss, "Boss, will you apply to the 23rd Division?"

Ling Lan turned off the virtual screen in her hands and said evenly, "Why wouldn't I? It's always good to have someone covering for you."

Ling Lan knew well that even if she chose to apply for the other divisions, her father would definitely use his authority to override her choice and bring her to the 23rd Division anyway. As such, why should she go against her dad's wishes and waste the effort? Besides, she was not against going to the 23rd Division.

"Then it's settled. We'll all apply to the 23rd Division together," said Luo Lang excitedly. His words made all the companions by his side nod emphatically; they had long decided that they would follow Ling Lan. Moreover, Ling Xiao was already their idol to begin with — they were very willing to go to the 23rd Division.

Luo Lang's excitement had just peaked when his mood dipped. Frowning in worry, he wondered aloud, "Who knows how the three new members will choose?"

Chapter 354

Enemy Invasion?

"Li Lanfeng will definitely go to the 23rd Division. I've already spoken with him," answered Ling Lan immediately. "As for Li Shiyu, as long as Qi Long's issue isn't resolved, he doesn't have a choice."

The others could not help but spare a handful of compassionate tears for Li Shiyu at Ling Lan's words. Thus, the poor Li Shiyu had sold off his entire life to the Lingtian Battle Clan... he had no more so-called freedom to speak of.

Hiding at one side, Qi Long secretly wiped away the cold sweat on his forehead, self-hypnotising himself inside, *'It's none of my business. All of this is Boss's idea...'* He still remembered that back when he had suffered that 'relapse', Boss had secretly injected him with a shot before it happened. There was absolutely something fishy about that shot.

"As for Chang Xinyuan, we can just ask him the next time we meet. Even if he is unwilling, there's still a few years' time for us to trick him into following us." Ling Lan stroked her chin, thinking about that mecha modification prodigy. Yup, she absolutely could not allow him to just slip away like that.

Trick? The moment Ling Lan said this, all of the other people in the villa reacted similarly. They all lifted their heads to look up at the ceiling, pretending they had not heard anything. They were a proper battle clan, definitely not some human trafficking syndicate... uh, although a few of the clan members had indeed been tricked into joining, overall, those were still the minority, right...? Everyone was justifying things to themselves, cautioning themselves that they absolutely could not be led astray by their boss.

Near the evening, Ling Lan walked out from the villa on her own. Qi Long and the others were still in their classes and had yet to return. Ling Lan had decided to go to the port to send her dad off so that he would not misunderstand things and mope again.

Ling Lan knew very well that Ling Xiao had come all this way in disguise to the military

academy primarily because he was worried about her and so wanted to come see for himself how she was doing. Although Ling Lan felt that Ling Xiao's actions were unnecessary, she could not deny that she was deeply moved by it. She had profoundly experienced the bottomless love and acceptance Ling Xiao had for his daughter. Even though they had missed spending the first sixteen years of her life here together, Ling Xiao was currently investing so much more than Ling Lan in their relationship. It should be said that Ling Xiao was scoring passing marks in taking on his role as a father.

Spending these last few days together in the military academy had let Ling Lan gradually integrate her image of the Ling Xiao in the legacy space with this Ling Xiao in the real world. If Ling Lan had not been so used to having her slackface on by now, and if Ling Xiao's face had not looked so ridiculously young, perhaps Ling Lan would have already fulfilled Ling Xiao's wish by calling him 'daddy'. As for right now...

Ling Xiao's assessment team was almost the final team to leave the First Men's Military Academy. There was quite a crowd that had come to send them off. Some were the upper-year cadets who had been enlisted into the 23rd Division, such as Huo Zhenyu and company, while there were also quite a number of lower-year cadets who admired the 23rd Division. These younger students had come over in between classes in hopes of making a stronger impression on the assessors.

While they knew that the assessors would be different every year, what if these officers happened to be the assessors again several years later...? They were unwilling to back down even just for this miniscule bit of hope.

This was still the first time that Huo Zhenyu had seen the leader of the 23rd Division's team. During the assessment period, this leader had not appeared at any of the assessment fields. Even the inspection tasks had only been handled by him at the end of the day after all the assessments had ended. Since Huo Zhenyu had decided to go to the 23rd Division, he naturally wanted to know more about it. He wanted to know what kind of leader this major general was — perhaps he would be able to see some shadow of General Ling Xiao from the other.

Huo Zhenyu believed that a leader under General Ling Xiao must have something special about him.

The major general looked very young — even the large face mask which almost covered his entire face was unable to conceal this fact. He led his team to the special

military port for the 23rd Division, but unlike the other assessment teams, he did not walk straight into the military vessel. Instead, he stood to one side, as if waiting for someone.

The other assessment team officers did not seem surprised by this. The major general had barely halted when they all spread out to stand in groups of two or three around him, where they then began chatting with one another. The mood was extremely casual and light-hearted.

Huo Zhenyu did not think much of it at first, but he soon noticed the intricacy behind the men's positions. Those officers may seem as if they were standing around randomly to chat, but that was not true. They had imperceptibly surrounded the major general, and the direction and angle of each person's position were different. It could be said that everything in the surroundings would fall into the eyes of at least one of the officers — not a single blind spot existed.

Huo Zhenyu was rendered speechless with astonishment. Who would have expected the leader of the 23rd Division to have such strong leadership skills? This scene had not occurred with any of the other assessment teams — even the leader of the teams might not be able to inspire such obedience from the proud and stubborn officers under their lead.

It could not be denied that even as Huo Zhenyu was astounded, he was secretly pleased. It was always better being able to join a united division rather than a divided army division which was prone to in-fighting.

Right at this time, Huo Zhenyu saw a very familiar figure strolling over. It was Ling Lan who had defeated him on the arena stage. Ling Lan bypassed the fence to walk straight towards the men of the 23rd Division. It looked like his target was that major general.

Huo Zhenyu was startled by this and he began to feel nervous for Ling Lan's sake. These officers of the 23rd Division may seem nice and friendly, but they were actually really hard to get along with. He had once tried to build some rapport with them but had failed miserably. The mocking gazes of those men had stopped Huo Zhenyu from seeking them out to talk again.

Huo Zhenyu thought that Ling Lan would be stopped by the surrounding officers before he could even get close to the major general, but unexpectedly, Ling Lan had just approached when the officer closest to him had smiled and given way to him. This

scene made Huo Zhenyu's pupils contract. It went without saying that Ling Lan must know that major general.

As Huo Zhenyu had put his full focus on the assessment, he had not paid attention to the other things that had happened within the school. Thus, he was unaware that Ling Lan had led the New Cadet Regiment to form a welcoming committee for the assessment teams, or that Ling Lan had been singled out for admiration by the head of the 23rd Division during the welcoming ceremony...

Huo Zhenyu's gaze dimmed slightly. Would the fact that Ling Lan knew the major general affect his future retaliation plan? However, Huo Zhenyu soon smiled, fighting spirit ablaze in his eyes. This was even better. If Ling Lan truly enlisted with the 23rd Division because of this, perhaps their revenge plot could be executed several years ahead of schedule.

"You've finally come! I thought you wouldn't even be willing to come see me off." Even though Ling Xiao's face was completely obscured by the large face mask, the humour in his eyes could not be concealed. It was clear to see that Ling Lan's arrival had pleased Ling Xiao's dragon heart greatly.

"Well, I forgot to ask you, Father, to pass on a message. Tell Mummy to not worry, I'm doing well here." Ling Lan reflexively scratched her nose, ignoring the hope in Ling Xiao's eyes, once again pretending not to see anything like an ostrich. Alright, just let her continue working at it!

Ling Xiao seemed to pick up on Ling Lan's embarrassment. He reached out a hand to tap Ling Lan lovingly on the forehead and said with a smile, "Got it. I'll pass on your message, my 'son'!" That said, Ling Xiao turned to leave and board his ship. Frankly, Ling Lan coming to send him off personally was already enough to satisfy him. As for calling him 'daddy', he was not impatient; there was still time. One day, he would let his daughter call him 'daddy' from the heart.

Ling Lan looked at Ling Xiao's stalwart back and then decisively fell into a cadet's salute, mouthing silently, "*Daddy, bon voyage!*" Although that cry of 'daddy' was not voiced, the love and respect she held in her heart for Ling Xiao could not be denied.

The assessment team of the 23rd Division very quickly followed their leader onto their ship, and the ship soon took off. Just like that, other than Qi Long and the other few knowing that Ling Xiao had visited the military academy, no one else had a clue that

the national idol and god-class operator General Ling Xiao had even graced the First Men's Military Academy with his presence.

Only after Ling Lan saw the warship fly away from the port did she put down her hand and turn away from the port. On her way back, she saw Huo Zhenyu standing right across from her, staring at her with a serious expression.

"Senior Huo, what's up?" asked Ling Lan lightly.

"Are you going to the 23rd Division in future?" asked Huo Zhenyu.

"Yes!" answered Ling Lan resolutely.

"Good. Four years later, I will wait for you at the 23rd Division. At that time, we shall fight to clear the grudge between us." Huo Zhenyu's eyes were filled with fighting spirit as he issued his challenge.

"Sounds good to me!" Ling Lan decisively clapped her hand against the other's outstretched palm, indicating that she had accepted Huo Zhenyu's challenge.

After striking palms, the two brushed by each other, leaving for their respective destinations without a backward glance. However, they both knew that they needed to begin preparing now for the battle four years from now.

Very soon, night descended. Ling Lan and the others finished dinner and then after another round of training, they each went off to rest.

At this time, the fleet of an unidentified faction had snuck into the skies of the planet they were on and were slowly making their silent way towards the planet... even more frighteningly, heaven knows what method they used to interrupt the satellite surveillance of this plot of sky. Not a single person nor piece of equipment discovered their presence.

A patrol ship was conducting its routine patrol and inspection around this area and found nothing unusual. It was just about to send this news down to the mainframe below when it found that it could not send out any messages.

"That's strange, why wasn't there any signal five times in a row?" The operator in charge of message transmission had tried sending a message 5 times consecutively, but the optical supercomputer always ended each attempt with a notification of

failure. This surprised the operator, causing him to shout out involuntarily. Although there had been times before when the message transmission would fail due to an unstable signal, it would typically only happen just once or twice and never more than three times. For this transmission to fail 5 times in a row was absolutely an abnormal occurrence.

The comms leader in charge of this area immediately came over to investigate. Sure enough, as the operator had said, there was no indicator of any signal at all being picked up by the device. He quickly said, "Which satellite are you connected to?"

"JX-12," responded the operator instantly.

"Change to JX-07 for me," ordered the team leader.

"Yes! Sir!" The operator immediately switched to contacting the satellite JX-07 but soon found that JX-07 was equally out of contact. "Sir, we can't connect to JX-07."

"Try the other satellites!" Cold sweat began to bead up on the team leader's forehead; he had sensed that something was up.

The operator tried again and again to connect to the other major satellites in this section of space but found all his efforts futile. "Sir, it's still not working."

"Could it be that the ship's communicator is broken?" asked the team leader.

"No, the results of the device's self-check is normal ¹ !" responded the operator immediately.

At these words, the team leader suddenly recalled a war of information that had taken place in the Federation 20 years ago. This kind of scenario had occurred then as well. His face changed drastically and he said, "Could this be an enemy invasion?"

Chapter 355

Ambush?

Just then, the surveillance radar operator announced with a shout, "Unidentified flying objects detected, number, preliminary estimation nineteen."

This announcement caught the captain's attention and he promptly ordered, "Get me visual, maximum magnification."

The person manning the scanner screens, upon receiving the coordinates provided by the radar operator, began searching and quickly located the targets, and then began zooming in. Soon, an image appeared on the main screen in the control room. What first appeared as nineteen black dots expanded gradually until rough silhouettes could be discerned. Despite the low resolution, everyone could see that the outlines of these unknown flying objects belonged to warship-class vessels.

Civilian and military ships were vastly different and could be easily distinguished based on their outlines. At the sight that greeted them, everyone felt alarmed. These mysterious warships, where had they come from and why had they never received any warning of any warships approaching their sector?

"Send the signal, request ID," the captain commanded through gritted teeth. He had a bad feeling about this, but hoped against hope that this fleet would turn out to be friendly.

"Alert ground control, report status," the captain prepared for the worst, directing communications personnel to brief the ground-level defensive troops on the situation.

"Sir, we've lost contact with ground control, the satellites are all dead," the communications team leader paled visibly as he informed his captain of the harsh reality of their situation.

Hearing this, the captain stood up fiercely and bellowed, "We must re-establish contact. This is definitely an enemy attack!" It was clear as day to the captain that this was undoubtedly an enemy offensive. Their only hope was to report this situation to the ground troops, otherwise... the thought gave the captain chills, and he broke out

in cold sweat.

If the enemy ambush succeeded, the First Men's Military Academy, situated on planet Newline directly below, would be done for!

The signalman, having tried repeatedly to contact the other fleet to no avail, anxiously asked the captain, "Sir, the other side is not responding. Your orders?"

Acting on a flash of insight, the captain clenched his jaw and commanded, "Alter course immediately, turn ninety degrees, full speed ahead!"

On receiving the order, every last technical operator in the main control room leapt to action. The patrol ship executed a flawless 90-degree turn, tracing a beautiful path against the sea of stars, then sped away towards the west. The vice-captain, standing beside the captain, could not help but ask softly, "Captain, is this really for the best?" The crime punished most severely by the Federation military was that of fleeing without even putting up a fight. If the military found out, the captain would surely be court-martialled.

"There are 19 military vessels in the enemy fleet, engaging them head-on is suicidal. I cannot allow my subordinate brothers to die in vain. Besides, we have a more important mission, which is to make contact with the ground troops and warn them of the impending danger. To do all this, we must survive! Even if it means getting court-martialled, I will have no regrets." With determination in his eyes, the captain went on, "Vice-captain, if planet Newline is ambushed, all the instructors and students at the First Men's Military Academy will be doomed..."

"No matter which faction the enemy is from, I fear their goal is to sever the Federation's production line of future soldiers. The faculty at the First Men's Military Academy is the cream of the Federation's crop, we absolutely cannot allow the enemy to succeed," said the captain in steely tones.

By now, the fleet of 19 warships had discovered the fleeing Federation patrol ship. The supercomputer of the leading warship outputted a warning message: "ONE PATROL SHIP IDENTIFIED AHEAD, TARGET LOCKED FOR PURSUIT. PLEASE ISSUE NEW ORDER - PURSUE/IGNORE?"

In response to this news, the fleet commander decisively ordered, "Ignore it, proceed according to plan." Did that patrol ship think running westward would ensure their

safety? The fleet commander flashed an icy smirk, clearly contemptuous.

As if on cue, two more fleets of warships suddenly appeared from either side, one with nine ships and the other, thirteen. Despite the emergency change of course, the Federation patrol ship was headed straight for the 13-ship fleet.

"Curses! Fire the cannons!" Realizing they had already fallen into the enemy's trap, the captain knew they had no chance, but a savage fire burned in his eyes. "Even if we die, we're taking some of the bastards with us!" screamed the captain.

The patrol vessel finally fired its main cannon, the missile's brilliant, glimmering tail arcing across the starry skies in an instant, barrelling straight towards one of the warships. Faced with the patrol ship's surprise attack, the warship moved to avoid it. Wherever the missiles scratched the sides of the warship, the once-glowing beam shields suddenly darkened...

With just one more shot, perhaps they really could have dealt the enemy a terrifying blow, but the patrol ship never got the opportunity to do so. The enemy fleet never gave them any chance; they were faced with the overwhelming cannon fire of the enemy salvo. With missiles blanketing the sky before them, even though the patrol ship tried desperately to dodge and weave with their beam shields turned up to maximum power, they could not hope to win. BOOM! The patrol ship was blasted by multiple missiles. The ship blew apart in an instant, the ship and its crew swallowed by a sky-piercing, fiery explosion, like a fireworks display. The next moment, all that was left were debris in the emptiness of space.

"Reporting! One patrol ship destroyed in the east!" the fleet entering from the east wasted no time in reporting to the main fleet. Following that, the western fleet also reported that the patrol ship that had tried to flee had been destroyed by them. All told, they had destroyed two patrol ships.

The fleet commander received the two fleets' reports and nodded in satisfaction. "The three patrol ships mentioned in our intelligence have all been destroyed, and the signals from the satellites in the area have also been silenced. It's time we made our next move. On my orders, let Operation Kill the Fledgling officially begin!"

Following the commander's order, the three fleets merged into one massive fleet. All the warships positioned themselves in the airspace above the First Men's Military Academy on planet Newline and began opening their launch ports. Soon, innumerable

black metallic spheres dropped speedily down towards the planet...

"This technology granted by the Twilight Empire ain't bad at all. We're undetectable by radar, and on top of that, it's the dead of night. I think by the time the anti-air ground troops realize it, our men will have landed. What happens next will be a test of the strength of our forces," said the commander-in-chief, unable to suppress a gloating smirk as he watched the metallic spheres populate the skies above the First Men's Military Academy like spring rain.

"Indeed, Commander, this time, we shall teach the Huaxians a bloody lesson!" haughtily replied the adjutant by the commander's side, his eyes glinting with vengeance and bloodlust. The blood of the Caesar Empire must never be spilled in vain!



"Boss, wake up! Boss, wake up!" Ling Lan woke with a start but kept her eyes closed, maintaining the pretence of being in deep sleep while activating her spiritual power. Quickly probing the state of the room and finding everything normal, no threats present, only then did she ask mentally, *"Little Four, what is it?"*

"I just lost contact with every satellite around the planet all of a sudden. This is highly unusual," Little Four hurriedly briefed Ling Lan of the situation.

"Can't you just re-connect?" Ling Lan was shocked to hear this.

"I can't reach them. I've already activated all the radars on the ground and all the monitoring equipment in the academy... I haven't found anything unusual yet, but something just feels off, like something bad is about to happen," Little Four replied anxiously. *"I learnt about a similar incident recorded in the academy mainframe's database, this could be an attack on our communications system by an enemy nation..."*

"Blindfolding us to keep us in the dark about the situation in the outside world... Could they be planning an ambush?" Ling Lan furrowed her brow, her mind flashing back to the events at the Swift Dragon base. Could this have something to do with that? Could it be that she had made a mistake somewhere and the enemy had discovered them?

On hearing Ling Lan's words, Little Four's eyes lit up and, nodding away, he said, *"Yup, yup, their objective is most likely to pull off an ambush!"*

Ling Lan made a snap decision and instructed Little Four, *"Little Four, immediately report any changes in the situation to me, especially anything transpiring in the skies. You haven't forgotten what happened six years ago, right?"* Ling Lan couldn't help but recall the incident on planet Demonbeast, where the Twilight Empire had managed to pull off an airborne offensive.

Ling Lan thought so, because the First Men's Military Academy in its current location was closely monitored by the ground forces, which made it impossible for any enemy nation to successfully invade it with large armies. Instead, they had employed such extravagant tactics as to create a total transmission lockdown, showing that their ambush this time was no petty skirmish. Since a ground invasion was impossible, a direct approach from the air was very likely. This was precisely why Ling Lan had especially notified Little Four to observe the skies.

As soon as Ling Lan was done instructing Little Four, her eyes sprang open, and with a shove of her right hand, she leapt down from the bed. She rapidly put on the academy uniform, opened the door to her room, and in a few steps, she arrived at the room closest to hers.

Ling Lan did not choose to knock politely, instead kicking the door in with a ferocious stomp.

With a violent "BANG!" Ling Lan blew the doorway open, the door itself crashing into the room from the force of the kick.

A crack was heard as the door was smashed to smithereens by some force mid-flight, the aftershocks sending the splinters exploding outward.

The first thing Ling Lan saw was a fist, and then someone on the bed somersaulted to the floor. Qi Long, who was naked above the waist and wearing only a pair of boxers, had one hand against the ground, poised like a cheetah waiting for any opportunity to strike.

Ling Lan glanced coolly at the sculpted, powerful body of Qi Long and his rippling muscles, and suppressed her envy. She said emotionlessly, "Enemy invasion, prepare for combat!" Such a formidable physique would never be hers in this lifetime, thought Ling Lan regretfully.

The tension Qi Long felt upon his rude awakening had abated when he saw that his

own boss was the one standing in the doorway, but at his boss's words, his heart started racing again. He stood up quickly and, retrieving the academy uniform hanging by the bed in one fluid motion, dressed rapidly before catching up to Ling Lan, asking anxiously, "Boss, what happened?"

Chapter 356

Tampering?

"I don't know. I'm only guessing that the military academy is probably being targeted for a large-scale enemy attack right now," said Ling Lan as they walked. Very soon they had come to the door of Luo Lang's room, and without even thinking about it, Ling Lan once again whipped out a savage kick to send the door flying open. However, the door opened to an empty room.

Just then, a person suddenly leapt out from the side, striking out ferociously at Ling Lan's face. Ling Lan calmly raised her right hand and caught the attacker's powerful fist with a palm.

"Boss, it's you!" Luo Lang saw that Boss Ling Lan was the one who had seized his fist and instantly let out a sigh of relief, crying out in joy. Apparently, the ruckus from Qi Long's room had startled the sleeping Luo Lang awake. He had thought that something was wrong and so had swiftly put on his clothes and hid behind the wall right by the door. When his door had been kicked open, he had then charged out to punch the intruder.

Ling Lan let go of Luo Lang's fist, and casting down a cold glance, she said, "Luo Lang, keep up!"

Luo Lang retracted his hand. Seeing the grim look on Ling Lan's face, he knew something had happened. Silently, he followed his boss, though he surreptitiously poked Qi Long beside him. Qi Long turned his head and mouthed silently, "Enemy invasion!"

Luo Lang's gaze turned cold. For his boss to be so concerned, this enemy invasion must be noteworthy. His thoughts ran along the same line Ling Lan's had, thinking of the events that had transpired at the Swift Dragon base. Could it be that the events there had caused them to be discovered?

However, looking at his boss's frigid expression, Luo Lang did not dare to ask any questions. Coming to the second floor, Ling Lan gave a signal to Qi Long and Luo Lang, motioning for them to split up and wake up Han Jijun, Lin Zhong-qing, and Xie Yi

respectively.

Very soon, everyone was awake. Fully dressed in their uniforms, they gathered at the living room downstairs. Ling Lan was seated primly on the sofa, deep in contemplation. Xie Yi and Lin Zhong-qing reflexively glanced at one another and saw the confusion in each other's eyes. They had only been woken up by Luo Lang and Qi Long without being told what was going on.

Han Jijyun walked down the stairs with a thoughtful expression. Coming to stand before Ling Lan, he waited for his boss to give him a definite answer.

"At present, our ground control has lost all contact with all the satellites in the space above this planet. It has been as long as 5 minutes." Ling Lan swept her gaze over everyone present and told them about the present situation.

Ling Lan's words gave everyone a shock, particularly Han Jijyun and Luo Lang. Aware of the importance of intelligence, they knew very well what this represented.

"It's an enemy invasion!" concluded Han Jijyun with conviction. Luo Lang nodded in agreement; he had come to the same conclusion as Han Jijyun. In contrast to Ling Lan's uncertain speculation, Han Jijyun and Luo Lang were obviously much more certain.

"My guess is the same. And I think the invasion will be coming from outer space." Ling Lan reflexively looked out at the starry sky outside the window. Wasn't the pitch darkness of the night sky a perfect setting for an air invasion?

Ling Lan's words caused everyone's expression to change. If things were really as Boss had said, then their First Men's Military Academy was in danger. Boiling over with anxiety, Xie Yi blurted, "Boss, then what should we do?"

"I have already taken control of the ground radar as well as all of the aerial monitoring equipment of the military academy. The moment I notice anything, I will sound the alarm of the entire academy," Ling Lan told her companions of her plans.

"Why not just sound the alarm now? This will make it easier for the ground forces to have time to put up their guard," asked Han Jijyun, puzzled.

"Unfortunately, there is nothing strange in the radar or the surveillance equipment. Without proof, their first response would be to suspect that the academy mainframe has been hacked. Then, they might put in all their effort to investigate this matter. The

potential loss outweighs the potential gains; I don't want to have this backfire on us to the enemy's gain," Ling Lan shared her concerns.

If the ground forces turned all their attention internally as a result, Ling Lan would surely regret it endlessly. Initially aiming to disrupt an enemy's invasion but ending up creating an even better opportunity for the invasion instead, Ling Lan would not do such a stupid thing...

"But losing contact with the satellites is a fact. As long as they learn of this, they should become wary." Han Jijyun could not understand why his boss was worrying like this. From his perspective, the matter was simple. As long as the ground forces knew that they had lost contact with the satellites for several minutes, they would certainly think of the possibility of an air invasion.

After listening to Han Jijyun's words, a bitter smile appeared on Ling Lan's lips. "What if, the equipment displays of all the ground devices connected to the satellites still show that everything is normal?" Only a fearsome existence such as Little Four could experience first-hand the truth that they had lost contact with the satellites; meanwhile, all the equipment were showing that everything was fine, and even the top-class hackers could sense nothing wrong. This was also why Ling Lan was forced to wait for something concrete to happen.

These words of Ling Lan finally caused the complexion of the composed Han Jijyun to change. "Boss, are you saying that there is no indication on the ground equipment about the loss of connection? But the fact is that we've already lost contact with the satellites?"

Ling Lan nodded and said, "Yes. Only hackers who have reached a certain level would be able to notice the problem." If Little Four had not loved to roam and wander about so much, he might have overlooked the problem as well...

Han Jijyun's entire face turned grim. "Who would have expected the enemy to go to such expense to accomplish such a thing? Rumour has it that only imperial level hackers and above can do something like this... although our military academy has cultivated many hackers, it has never once produced an imperial level one. Even in the entire Federation, the number of imperial hackers can be counted on one hand. It is to be expected that the ground forces will never notice that the satellites have been tampered with."

Tampered with? Han Jijyun's words caused Ling Lan's mind to jolt, an idea appearing in her mind's eye which would resolve their current passive situation. Ling Lan excitedly called out to Little Four, "Little Four, can you fabricate an image of the satellites transmitting?"

Ling Lan's words made Little Four roll his eyes and he said with a pout, "Boss, you're underestimating me too much. This kind of thing, I can do it even with my eyes closed." Was it necessary to ask him about such a simple thing? When would his boss have a little more faith in him?

"That's good..." Little Four's words sent a bolt of glee through Ling Lan's heart. She began instructing Little Four on what he had to do. As Ling Lan elaborated, Little Four's gaze became brighter and brighter — in the end, he patted his chest and told Ling Lan to leave it all to him.

After accepting Ling Lan's arrangements, Little Four vanished. As if letting down a great burden, Ling Lan's mood became instantly much more relaxed. She thought about it for a bit and then said to Lin Zhong-qing, "Contact Li Lanfeng, Li Shiyu, and Chang Xinyuan immediately. Let the three of them gather here at our place right away."

After that, she told the others, "You all, immediately contact all the team leaders of the New Cadet Regiment. Tell them about this news!" At this point, Ling Lan suddenly got up from the sofa and walked over to the window to stare up at the endless night sky. After several seconds of silent contemplation, she said icily, "Tell them to gather all their team members, be on standby, and be prepared to fight!"

"Yes, Boss!" Everyone sprang into motion.



About five minutes later, the initially still and silent school suddenly rang with the ear-splitting screech of an enemy invasion alarm.

When Ling Lan heard the alarm rip through the night air, the corners of her lips tilted up despite herself. If the enemy truly thought they could easily consume this entire school, then just let them try...

Qi Long and the others, who had been sitting to one side quietly, leapt up at the cacophony and asked, "Boss, has the enemy been sighted?"

Ling Lan composedly sat on the sofa, shook her head and said, "No!"

"Then this alarm..." Qi Long was confused now. They had all heard the conversation between Boss and Han Jijyun — Boss had clearly said that he would only sound the alarm once the enemy had been sighted.

"I was indeed the one who sounded the alarm," replied Ling Lan calmly.

"Didn't you say that without any proof, the ground forces will not believe it?" asked Han Jijyun, bewildered, unsure why his boss had suddenly changed his mind.

"They can tamper with the displays, but we can also tamper with the displays." Ling Lan's lips pulled into a cold curve.

Ling Lan's reply made everyone's eyes light up; all of them knew what Ling Lan meant. Indeed, if the other side could make it so the satellite displays registered everything as normal, then they too could make it so that the satellite displays indicated some problem... most people were just trapped by fixed ideas, believing that attack methods could only be used on an enemy. Sometimes, for the greater picture, these methods could also be applied to one's own side.

Han Jijyun cast a searching glance at the composed Boss Lan before him, his heart maxed out with admiration ¹. While they were still thinking within the box, Boss Lan had already thrown the box wide open — his every action was already beyond any fixed boundaries of thinking. Whether something was good or bad, he could take and use it, as long as the final outcome was advantageous to their side.

Other than that, there was one more thing. Han Jijyun had always thought Boss Lan was just a top-class hacker, but now it looked like he should already be at the level of imperial-class hacker... as expected of their boss, still as unfathomable even when it came to other domains.

"Enemy invasion, enemy invasion, all ground troops are commanded to enter combat mode. All anti-air cannons on the ground to be aimed towards the sky. Prepare to fire..." The commander of the ground forces had received the images sent by the satellites and had instantly broken out into cold sweat. He immediately ordered the ground forces to begin moving. The sudden appearance of countless starships in the images as well as those golden metallic eggs spewing from the ships proved that this was a fearsome aerial invasion. Thank god for the timely images sent by the satellites,

otherwise they would have been finished over here.

"Reporting to the chief. There is no sign of any unidentified flying objects in the sky on the radars. Everything is normal." Very soon, all the radar surveillance centres sent over the latest updates; they had not discovered anything wrong in the skies above. This situation bewildered the commander — what in the world was going on? Why didn't the ground radars pick up anything as indicated by the images from the satellites? Where exactly was the problem?

"Chief, do you still remember the planet Demonbeast invasion incident in that top-secret military report 6 years ago?" The adjutant by the commander's side found the situation equally puzzling, but his gaze suddenly lit up at this recollection and he quickly alerted the commander.

The commander came to a realisation and hurriedly ordered the staff officer beside him, "Quickly. Get me the information on the invasion of planet Demonbeast six years ago."

Chapter 357

Arrangements!

It took only a few seconds for the information on the planet Demonbeast invasion to be displayed on the large screen of the command centre. When the commander saw that familiar egg-shaped object, he was instantly enlightened. Rage burned brightly in his heart and he cursed out loud, "Godd*mmit, it's those f*cking Twilightians again."

"Chief, according to the data, the metal of the eggs can avoid radar detection..." The adjutant managed to find the info he wanted with a quick skim of the data. It looked like he had remembered correctly — radars were useless against these egg-shaped metal objects.

"So that's how it is. Issue the order — do not trust the radars, use infrared telescopes to search the skies." The commander had also seen that piece of information. Slamming a palm down hard on the surface before him, he commanded angrily.

"Yes! Chief!" The officers below the commander acknowledged his order and passed on his instructions. While the anti-air ground cannoneer troops were watching the skies intently, the team leaders of the New Cadet Regiment were leading all their team members to gather before Ling Lan's villa.

Li Lanfeng, Li Shiyu, and Chang Xinyuan were the last to arrive as their accommodations were the furthest away from Ling Lan's villa. When they saw the crowd gathered in the little garden before the villa, even as they were astonished, they could feel the potential power behind Ling Lan.

As soon as they entered the living room, they saw twenty people either standing or sitting all around the room. When he saw these people, Li Lanfeng's gaze flickered subtly. He recognised all these people — the Wuji Mecha Clan had collected detailed information on the New Cadet Regiment previously. These people were all the team leaders in the New Cadet Regiment, and were likely to be the leaders of battle clans in the future. For now, they were all members of Ling Lan's New Cadet Regiment.

Ling Lan was currently seated on the sofa. Seeing Li Lanfeng and the other two arrive, she merely gave them a look signalling them to go find Qi Long. Li Lanfeng and the

others knew that Ling Lan was in the middle of a discussion with these people, so they made no sound, silently moving to Qi Long's side.

Qi Long saw them coming and then told them about the situation. Li Lanfeng was shocked by the news — after receiving the text to come, he had been rushing over when he had suddenly heard the sound of sirens, so he knew something major must have happened, but he had never expected that things would be so serious.

However, Li Lanfeng quickly pushed the shock to the back of his mind. He focused his attention on Ling Lan, wanting to know what Ling Lan was discussing with the team leaders. After listening for a while, Li Lanfeng's expression became more and more grim. He did not expect the rabbit to be so daring, actually setting his sights on the mecha storehouse during such a dangerous moment.

"Clearly, the upcoming battle will be a mecha battlefield. We are personally too weak to stand against mecha. We have no way at all to resist, to protect ourselves. So, we need to obtain weapons equal to the enemy's," stated Ling Lan coldly.

"Boss Lan, it's not that we don't trust your judgment, but we have never used real mecha before, especially those members of the lower ranks. Some have only begun learning how to operate mecha in Mecha World. They will not be able to put up any fight at all." At this time, one team leader shared the real situation of the members below him. His words received the agreement of quite a number of the team leaders, because they too had a significant number of members like that under them.

"Is that so...?" Ling Lan frowned at those words. Because all her team members could operate mecha, she had temporarily forgotten that not every team was as fearsome as her team ¹. After some thought, Ling Lan said, "It's my mistake... then let's do this instead. We'll split into two groups. Those who have confidence in their skills can come with me, while those who cannot operate mecha yet will form another team..."

Here, Ling Lan paused. Very soon, she handed out a document to all the team leaders and pointed out a spot marked with a red star. "The other team will go to this location. It is the most secure anti-air stronghold of the military academy. Once they are inside, they will not have to worry about their safety any longer."

It was naturally Little Four who had found this safe anti-air base as well. Right after they had arrived at the school, Little Four had already mapped out every single nook and cranny of the campus, whether it was open or hidden away. The school had around

thirty anti-air facilities, but only three were the best in terms of sturdiness and safety. The one Ling Lan had marked out was the one closest to them out of the three.

Seeing this map, Wu Jiong was startled. He lifted his head to stare at Ling Lan, wondering — could it be that Boss Lan's hacker powers were already so strong that there was nowhere in this school which was barred to him? Coming from a military family, he knew very well that this map was definitely a confidential document. For Ling Lan to have gotten his hands on it within such a short time frame, he must have used some extraordinary means.

As if noticing the suspicion in Wu Jiong's eyes, Li Lanfeng, who had been closely observing the proceedings all this while, quickly spoke up, "This map was given to Boss Lan by me."

Li Lanfeng may have been too concerned about the rabbit and had not taken the time to reflect on the matter. Since these team leaders were all part of the New Cadet Regiment, they should already know a thing or two about the regiment commander Ling Lan's abilities. When he had spoken up, there had only been one thought in Li Lanfeng's mind, and that was that he must help the rabbit hide his secrets...

Li Lanfeng's words made a trace of surprise flash across Ling Lan's eyes, but when she saw the worry contained in Li Lanfeng's eyes, she instantly understood why Li Lanfeng had said what he had said...

The corners of Ling Lan's lips quirked up slightly, her heart suffused with pleasure. So it turned out that it felt pretty good to have someone worry for you. Basking in the enjoyment of this feeling, Ling Lan did not say anything to refute Li Lanfeng's statement. She leaned back on the sofa with a half-smile, waiting to see how Li Lanfeng would flesh out his lie.

Li Lanfeng's unexpected interjection made Wu Jiong turn his head to look at him in surprise. When he saw Li Lanfeng, his brow furrowed noticeably.

In contrast to Ling Lan and Qi Long who only focused on their own matters, Wu Jiong was clearly more like a true regiment commander. Over this period of time, he had completely grasped the information of the high-level people associated with the various major factions, and Li Lanfeng was one of them. Wu Jiong remembered very clearly that Li Lanfeng was the primary strategist of the Wuji Mecha Clan. Even though the Wuji Mecha Clan had taken in a new strategist this year, threatening his position

within the faction, it could not be denied that the Wuji Mecha Clan's dominance over the Central Academy faction to stay in third place these past few years was definitely due to this person's strategies.

As a newborn faction, the other factions of the military academy were all rivals of the New Cadet Regiment. As such, this person should be someone on the opposing side, so why had he shown up here? With an expression filled with wariness, Wu Jiong asked coldly, "As the strategist of the academy's number three faction, the Wuji Mecha Clan, I'd like to know why you chose to hand this map to our regiment commander."

Wu Jiong had no doubts that this map had been submitted by Li Lanfeng. As the primary strategist of the Wuji Mecha Clan and a senior cadet who had hung around the academy for four years, it was still very possible for the other to obtain a top-secret map like this one.

Wu Jiong's questioning caused Li Lanfeng to instinctively shift back into his initial character role. With a slight smile on his face, he said, "Because I have already left the Wuji Mecha Clan and intend to join under Boss Lan's banner. And this map is my entrance submission. Boss Lan, isn't that so?" Li Lanfeng cast his gaze at Ling Lan, a subtle sense of pleading in his eyes, as if hoping for Ling Lan to work with him here.

Seeing this, Ling Lan nodded slightly and said, "Yes, it is indeed as he said." As expected of a black-bellied fellow, lies coming so easily to his lips... Ling Lan found that she really did not know Li Lanfeng. Still, Ling Lan believed that Li Lanfeng's sincerity in wanting to join her battle clan was indisputable, even while he remained unaware of her true identity. This was why Ling Lan still chose to believe in Li Lanfeng even after learning of his true identity.

Wu Jiong was sceptical over Li Lanfeng's words, because no matter how you looked at it, the bright future of the Wuji Mecha Clan as one of the top three factions in the school was obviously much more attractive than the uncertain fate of the New Cadet Regiment. An intelligent person typically would not abandon Wuji and choose the New Cadet Regiment, and Li Lanfeng was precisely one of those most intelligent people.

Wu Jiong was not satisfied with Li Lanfeng's explanation, but seeing how composed Ling Lan was, he put aside the suspicions he harboured in his heart. Wu Jiong believed that since Ling Lan dared to take in Li Lanfeng, he must have some plan in mind. Perhaps there was some deeper meaning behind all this — Wu Jiong did not want to

ruin Boss Lan's great plan by doing anything unnecessary.

However, Wu Jiong still could not help making a slight threat, "I hope you manage to do what you say... don't disappoint Boss Lan." Strategists or whatever are the worst — they are all a bunch of inscrutable people with bellies full of plots and schemes — Wu Jiong was rather leery of people like that.

In response to Wu Jiong's threat, Li Lanfeng retained his usual smile just as if he had heard nothing, as composed as ever. This discouraged Wu Jiong somewhat — as expected, the other was not someone easy to handle.

At this point, Ling Lan could tell that this matter had come to a close. Not having to explain the source of the map made things considerably easier for Ling Lan. With a stern expression, she ordered all the team leaders, "Tally up the numbers immediately. Five minutes later, I want to know the final name lists for both groups."

"Yes, Regiment Commander!" replied everyone respectfully.

Five minutes went by quickly and the name lists were submitted. At this time, ten or so kilometres away from the academy, a sudden loud roaring of artillery firing could be heard, the flash from the shots lighting up the initially dark night...

Everyone in the living room, other than Ling Lan, instantly leapt towards the windows. Looking up into the sky above, they saw that countless metal eggs had appeared. This scene caused all their faces to change. Although they trusted Boss Lan's judgment, really seeing it was another matter. When the night sky had been cut by the flares of artillery fire, what came into sight was a sky full of metal eggs, shocking them all to the core... war had truly descended upon them.

Ling Lan calmly scanned the two lists in her hands and then clapping her hands together, she said loudly, "Wu Jiong, Li Yingjie!"

Wu Jiong and Li Yingjie had been rendered dumbstruck by the scene in the sky; suddenly hearing Ling Lan shout out their names, they shivered and quickly replied, "Here!"

"You two, immediately lead the second team to the anti-air stronghold." Ling Lan handed the second name list to Wu Jiong.

Wu Jiong's gaze flickered but he did not reach out to take the list, as if somewhat

hesitant to accept Ling Lan's orders. Ling Lan continued to say, "You both should know where the mecha storehouse is. We will wait for you two there. I cannot trust anyone else with this second group."

When Wu Jiong and Li Yingjie heard this, they were instantly filled with the feeling that it would be worth dying for someone who understood them. Wu Jiong nodded emphatically as he accepted the name list and replied, "Boss Lan, Yingjie and I will definitely make sure to escort them safely to the anti-air shelter."

Beside him, Li Yingjie also patted his chest in agreement that they would definitely complete the task given to them successfully.

Alright. This was the first time Li Yingjie, who liked strutting around causing trouble, had been entrusted with such an important task. In his excitement, his admiration for Boss Lan grew. Sure enough, Boss Lan was still the person who knew him best... it actually felt so amazing to be trusted.

Chapter 358

This is Real Battle!

"Okay, then I'll leave everything to you both," said Ling Lan solemnly before turning to look at Chang Xinyuan to say, "Chang Xinyuan, you follow them!"

Chang Xinyuan's expression changed and he asked, "Why, Boss Lan?"

"This is a real battle. Your mecha control skills will not keep you alive on the battlefield." Ling Lan did not care about protecting Chang Xinyuan's feelings, bluntly telling him the reason for her order. This was not Mecha World, where Chang Xinyuan had his own modified mecha; all the mecha in the mecha storehouse would be standard mecha. Like Ling Lan had said, to survive the battlefield, they would need to rely on their own control skills and techniques.

Ling Lan's merciless words made Chang Xinyuan lower his head in shame. Ling Lan saw the dejected Chang Xinyuan and gave a mental sigh. It looked like she would not be able to set aside the role of spiritual life coach anytime soon. Thus, she said, "There will be many more opportunities to fight. Train your control skills up well after this so that, at that time, you will be able to move alongside us."

Ling Lan's words of reassurance did not make Chang Xinyuan feel much better. He clenched his fists tight with his head bowed, an uncontrollable sense of disappointment and rage in his heart. He was disappointed because he was being left behind again... this was already the second time, and the reason for both times was the same — his mecha control skills were not up to par.

He knew that the support members of other battle clans typically would not go to the battlefield personally, using their talents to serve their battle clans from the rear instead. However, he did not want to become that type of support member. He wanted to be Lin Zhong-qing, or Li Shiyu, or Han Jijyun — they were all support members, but their combat prowess was formidable enough that he looked up to them. The more time he spent with them, the more keenly he felt his incompetence. The modification innate talent he was so proud of had no place at all here... yes, he was angry at his own helplessness. If he had just spent a little more effort in the past to train up his mecha control skills, perhaps he would not have had to be left behind now.

However, this was the last time. He absolutely would not allow Boss Lan to leave him behind for the third time! Chang Xinyuan made this solemn vow to himself. Then, he lifted his head decisively to look at his boss and say firmly, "I will no longer be the weak link, Boss Lan. I will do what I say."

Even Wu Jiong and Li Yingjie standing to one side could feel Chang Xinyuan's determination, and they found their admiration growing even more for Ling Lan's ability to attract talent. Those who Boss Lan took in, no matter how useless they were at first, would soon go through tremendous changes, and this was something they could not replicate.

Chang Xinyuan's words made Ling Lan's heart move. She nodded seriously and said, "I believe you!" Ling Lan was more than glad to see a team member want to become stronger.

Right after that, Ling Lan turned to look at Wu Jiong and Li Yingjie and said, "Take action immediately. If the enemy manages to land successfully and get into the school, you all really won't be able to move anywhere anymore." The dormitory district was equipped with a full defensive beam shield. Once it activated due to artillery fire, those within the district would not be able to get out anymore, unless this defensive shield was broken by external forces.

Ling Lan did not think highly of this defensive beam shield. In her eyes, this was a design failure, which forced the students inside to become turtles in a jar. The moment the defensive beam shield was shattered, those cadets made to remain within the dormitory district would be served up to the enemy on a platter. This was also why Ling Lan had asked the students of the New Cadet Regiment to relocate to the anti-air shelter.

"Yes, Boss Lan!" Wu Jiong and Li Yingjie knew that time was short. Without further delay, they immediately went outside with Chang Xinyuan and led the second group swiftly away from Ling Lan's villa, sprinting towards their destination.

Following the departure of group two, the New Cadet Regiment which originally stood at near 300 members suddenly lost about half their number. Only about a little more than 100 members remained, and most of them were ex-students of the Central Scout Academy. They had fought alongside Ling Lan during the grand armed melee, as well as hijacked a spaceship with her. Now, under Ling Lan's lead once more, they were about to break into the military academy's mecha storehouse and engage in real

mecha battle much earlier than expected. Newborn calves are not afraid of tigers — they were not afraid to fight; thoughts of the upcoming battle made them immensely excited instead.

It should be known that only cadets with exceptional results would have the chance to board real mecha and battle with them in their third year at the academy. Otherwise, they would only be able to use real mecha in their fourth year. But now, under Ling Lan's lead, this moment was brought forward by two to three years. They were even heading straight into the actual combat stage! This once again reinforced the notion that if they followed Boss Lan, they would definitely have lots of thrills to sink their teeth into ¹ and would be able to do some things they would never have dared to even dream of on their own...

Ling Lan looked around at these unusually excited faces and was secretly rather worried. Being too excited was not a bad thing, but they could not lose their calm. In particular, all these people had followed her since the Central Scout Academy days. Every time she pushed to do something outrageous, these schoolmates would support her without any hesitation or regret. It could be said that without their support, the grand armed melee back then would never have been launched at all. And without their full cooperation, taking control of the spaceship would not have gone so smoothly.

This time, she had boldly chosen to break into the mecha storehouse. Although a part of it was indeed a matter of personal safety — in the face of an overwhelming horde of enemy mecha, only mecha could provide Ling Lan with a sense of safety — a larger part was because she truly wanted to give these schoolmates who trusted her an extra measure of protection and the ability to truly decide their own survival. This way, she hoped that after tonight, she would still be able to see these schoolmates tomorrow...

Ling Lan's entire aura unfolded as her ice-cold gaze swept dispassionately over the gathered people. Everyone there felt the icy blade of her gaze scrape across their skin, a chill rising from within them, and their initially restless excitement instantly cooled down.

Seeing the clarity and level-headedness in everyone's eyes once again, only then did Ling Lan say slowly, "I repeat once more that this is a real battle, not a game. It is not the virtual Mecha World where you can revive again after dying. The enemy we are about to face are real enemies. They are experienced battle veterans, they are fearsome executioners. If we die, it will be true death. There is no second chance..."

even so, will you all still follow me to the mecha storehouse and operate mecha to fight the enemy to the death?"

"Fight! Fight! Fight!" Ling Lan's words caused everyone's blood to boil. They seemed to have returned back to the time of the grand armed melee... Ling Lan had asked something similar back then. That year, the same words shouted by the hundred thousand or so students of the 7th grade at the same time had seemed much more grand and impressive...

"Then, I'll set the battle plan. Everyone, listen closely." Ling Lan once again circulated her spiritual power, funnelling her words forcefully into the spiritual well of these hundred or so students. "We will move and fight in small units. Remember, do not fight alone. Always keep in mind that while we fight for ourselves, we are also fighting for the comrades beside us. And one last thing. That is, we must come back alive!"

When Ling Lan roared out that final phrase, she used her strongest burst of spiritual power yet. She was about to lead her schoolmates in breaking into the mecha storehouse to fight with the enemy, all so that the students would live and become stronger — she did not want them to die here.

Ling Lan's words rallied the spirits of the cadets. The words 'come back alive' was imprinted deeply in their minds. At the same time, they glanced in unplanned unison at the companions by their sides and their initially somewhat uneasy hearts settled. At the sight of their friends, their agitation and uncertainty silently faded away. Boss Lan was right — they still had their comrades beside them; they were not fighting alone!

Just like that, Ling Lan led the hundred odd students away from the dormitory district in a rapid sprint towards the mecha storehouse about 10 kilometres away. In the meantime, far away in the opposite direction of their route, the endless roar of artillery fire sounded, accompanied by the occasional burst of fire illuminating the night sky.

As the ground forces had been unable to locate their targets with the radars, they could only rely on manual infrared telescopes to search out the enemy. After waiting patiently for more than 10 minutes, those airborne visitors they had waited so long for finally appeared in the sights of their infrared telescopes...

"Chief, there's news! Countless unidentified objects have really appeared in the air

above..." The ground control headquarters, which had been waiting for news all this time, finally obtained the verification they needed.

"Son of a b*tch. Those f*ckers have finally come." The commander brusquely tore off his cap and threw it onto the ground. He tugged on his sleeves and then bellowed, "All artillery units, prepare to fire. Once the enemy is within range, shoot without mercy!"

"Yes, Chief!" The commander's words were very quickly transmitted by his subordinate officers. After some thought, the commander added, "Let the ground mecha forces prepare for battle. Those metal eggs must all contain mecha. Any mecha fortunate enough to survive and land are to be swiftly handled by the mecha teams."

The commander's orders were quickly passed on to the ground mecha troops. The mecha troops had long made preparations for battle. Receiving this order, they immediately dispersed with a column of troops making up each combat unit. Based on the information they had received from above, the metal eggs were raining down from all over, so no one would be able to tell which nook and cranny might have an enemy mecha which had landed successfully. Therefore, they had no choice but to spread out and search for those enemy mecha that had been lucky enough to evade the artillery fire.

Meanwhile, at this time, the starships in the skies had no idea that the secret invasion plan they had believed to be so flawless had been exposed by the presence of a miraculous intelligence entity. It had created some false information, allowing the ground forces to react in time and make the appropriate tactical arrangements...

Finally, the metal eggs entered the range of the ground artillery. All of the cannons opened fire simultaneously, and the darkness of the night was suddenly ripped asunder by countless streaks of blazing fire as projectiles struck the first batch of metal eggs closest to the ground...

After being struck by artillery fire, the metal eggs abruptly split open, dropping three or four mecha from within it... some of the mecha still seemed fairly intact, but some had been instantly destroyed by the force of the artillery fire.

Although the metal eggs had the ability to hide from radars, there was a condition. The items loaded inside the eggs could not have any energy responses, otherwise this concealment ability would be disrupted. Thus, all of the mecha contained within the eggs were turned off. The operators inside had planned to only activate their mecha

in the final 100 metres before they landed and break out of the egg's shell then... mecha which were stripped of their defences were fragile. If a vital point was hit, it too would not be able to withstand a single attack from a normal cannon.

"What is going on here? How did the ground forces learn about our sneak attack?" The situation below was very quickly grasped by the fleet in space. The commander-in-chief could not help but growl furiously when he saw the tragic scene occurring below.

Chapter 359

Requesting Backup!

"The situation is unclear right now. In any case, it's already been confirmed that the ground forces below are prepared... I'm afraid our ambush plan has been exposed." The adjutant could not help but swipe the cold sweat from his forehead as he said to the commander-in-chief.

The commander-in-chief breathed deeply a few times before quashing the rage beating at the walls of his chest. He knew that anger would not help anything — since it was certain that their sneak attack had failed, then they could only proceed with brute force! Coming to a decision instantly, he ordered, "Notify the men below. Let all mecha activate in advance. Break the shells now and attack!"

His orders were transmitted to the metal eggs and those eggs which had yet to enter the range of the cannons suddenly burst open. From within them, activated mecha emerged to descend swiftly, zooming towards the ground.

"Godd*mmmit, these cannons can't penetrate the beam shields of the mecha," said a commanding officer, frustrated. He had observed this scene from a watchtower with an infrared telescope. Initially, he was hoping to destroy a few more of these metal eggs so that there would be fewer enemy mecha landing on the planet's surface. The fewer the better, but now it looked like things would not be that easy. The enemy was very alert — seeing that their sneak attack had failed, they had immediately switched to a direct attack.

Following the appearance of the mecha, the initially silent radars suddenly began screeching. Countless dots representing the enemies' mecha popped up all over the radar display. By this point, everyone now knew that those metal eggs must have some radar-shielding functions. It was lucky that the commander had been astute enough to see through the ruse and had told them to give up on the radars in favour of infrared telescopes instead. Although their search range would be limited by 7 to 8 times less, at least they had not been blind anymore and had been able to locate the invading enemy...

The first few enemy mecha were already close to the ground. Just as they were

rejoicing over their fortune in evading the cannonfire, they were struck in quick succession by several beam shots. A few unprepared enemy mecha died instantly, exploding. It turned out that the mecha columns waiting on the ground had all fired when they saw the enemy land, welcoming these enemy mecha with their beam guns.

Soon, the ground mecha forces and the enemy mecha descending from the skies began to fight. The flames of war very rapidly spread to the ground — when an errant missile fired by god-knows-who shot into the dormitory district of the First Men's Military Academy, the already startled awake district was instantly enveloped by a localised beam shield... those inside could not come out, while those outside could not go in either. Unless the administration of the academy decided to override and get the mainframe to turn it off or an external force destroyed the shield, the shield would stand. If the latter happened, it would pretty much spell the loss of the Federation. The final outcome would be the complete annihilation of all the students in the dormitory district...

The commander of ground control saw the dazzling beam shield appearing suddenly behind the ground troops, and he could not help but be greatly annoyed. Wasn't this just setting up a clear target for the enemy? Telling them: quick, come attack this spot... Which idiot had designed this procedure? Although it must have been out of good intentions ¹, in the darkness of the night, set against such a chaotic and complicated attack situation, this was an absolutely foolish and reckless response.

Worried, the commander could not help but growl angrily at the officer beside him, "Godd*mmmit, let the frontline warriors hold off the offence! We must not let the enemy's attacks reach the dormitory district of the military academy..."

The future seedlings of hope of the Federation were there. Any students who could enter the First Men's Military Academy were sure to be the top talents of the Federation. Every single one was an elite with great potential which they could not afford to lose.

Right then, Little Four was still trying to make contact with those out of reach satellites, but unfortunately, till now, he had had no luck at all. He could not find any bit of signal from the various major satellites; this made him feel rather discouraged. He understood that the moment he left the virtual world and had his signal jammed by the enemy, he would be worthless...

Luckily, he had perfectly completed the task his boss had assigned to him. He had

taken the images from the invasion of planet Demonbeast 6 years ago and modified them to fabricate an image of the attack tonight. Then, faking a satellite transmission, he had sent the images to the intelligence department of ground control, giving the ground troops enough time to prepare. Watching those enemies descending from the skies being caught off guard by the ground forces, Little Four was pumped up. At the same time, he found his admiration for his boss growing even further, even thinking for a moment that his boss was a god, being able to guess so accurately how the enemy was invading!

Frankly, Little Four was overthinking things. Ling Lan had only hoped for the ground forces to be prepared, and the invasion of planet Demonbeast 6 years ago just so happened to be an air invasion as well, which fit the situation tonight very well. Thus, Ling Lan had made an impromptu decision to borrow the images from then. In fact, Ling Lan had no idea who the invading enemy was tonight or how they were attacking. It should be said that Ling Lan's luck was extraordinary — the images she had asked Little Four to send just so happened to match the truth. This great stroke of luck deftly concealed any sign of her interference. In the post-war analysis later on, both the Federation and Caesar would come to the same conclusion, believing that Caesar's satellite shielding technology was not sufficiently advanced, thus allowing one of the satellites to capture and transmit the images of their sneak attack... the difference, however, was that the Federation would be relieved and gleeful about this point, while Caesar would be frustrated that the flaw in their technology had appeared at such a critical moment.

Still, as the battle progressed, the enemy adjusted to the situation and the inherent uncertainty of battle began to reveal itself. The fighting soon spread across the ground, and massive numbers of casualties began to appear among the ground forces. Meanwhile, an endless stream of mecha continued to descend from above... this made Little Four feel somewhat unsettled.

At a loss, Little Four could only run back to ask for his boss's opinion, taking the opportunity to update his boss on the current battle situation as well. Frankly, as they were moving, when Ling Lan had seen the dormitory district suddenly become a shining beacon, she had sensed that the situation might soon become unfavourable for the Federation. Now, hearing Little Four's report, she knew that if the satellites continued to be sealed away so reinforcements could not be summoned in time, it would be very difficult for the ground forces to hold out for long on their own. Ling Lan was well aware of the power of a mecha. It was impossible to destroy even just a common lower mecha without suicidal-style attacks from a whole column of warriors

They needed to send out the news of the attack here as soon as possible. Ling Lan made a split decision to use the emergency helpline her father had given to her before he had left ³. Ling Lan and Ling Xiao were all disciples of the Divine Command Sect. As a sect specialising in the cultivation of spiritual power, they naturally possessed a way to request for backup without the need for advanced high-tech signals.

Before Ling Xiao had departed from the academy, because he just could not push aside his worry, he had deposited a cord of his spiritual power within Ling Lan's mind. If Ling Lan found herself in any danger, she would only need to shake and detonate Ling Xiao's spiritual power. No matter how far away Ling Xiao was, he would be able to sense a disturbance in his spiritual power. Even though he would not be able to know the specific details, this strange occurrence would be enough to let Ling Xiao know that Ling Lan was in danger.

Ling Lan decisively shook and detonated Ling Xiao's cord of spiritual power. Her body jerked and her face turned pale. Detonating spiritual power stored within one's mind would deal a certain amount of damage to the bearer; this was also why Ling Xiao had emphasised that this method should only be used when she felt the situation was extremely dire... the strange shift in Ling Lan's condition drew the attention of her companions. Qi Long asked quietly, "Boss, are you alright?"

"I'm fine. We should increase our pace. Time is running out," said Ling Lan calmly, forcibly suppressing the discomfort she felt in her spiritual power. After that, her speed picked up once more.

Seeing Ling Lan speed up like nothing was wrong, her companions let out a sigh of relief and relaxed. They sped up after Ling Lan. Only Li Lanfeng frowned as he stared at Ling Lan's still pale complexion, a trace of worry flashing across his eyes...

Right then, on the military ship of the 23rd Division's assessment team, seated on the captain's seat, resting, Ling Xiao's eyes suddenly sprang open. He shot up in his seat, his initially mild and gentle aura turning cold in an instant. This caused the nonchalantly chatting officers by his side to fall silent instantly, turning to stare in bewilderment at this usually always mild-mannered sir general.

Ling Xiao had no mind to keep up appearances at this time, because he had sensed a sudden tug on his spiritual self. This meant that the spiritual deposit he had left in

Ling Lan's mind had been hit and dispersed by someone.

"Contact the First Men's Military Academy immediately. Find out what's going on there..." ordered Ling Xiao with an icy expression. Without a smile on his face, Ling Xiao actually looked a lot like Ling Lan — as expected of a father and a daughter.

"Contact established. The other party has responded that all is as usual," the operator responsible for external communications quickly replied.

Ling Xiao frowned when he heard this. If Ling Lan had detonated the spiritual power he had left in her mind, that must mean that some huge problem she could not handle on her own had cropped up where she was... he immediately tried to connect to Ling Lan's communicator but only received a busy signal in return.

A cold glint passed through Ling Xiao's eyes, and he attempted to contact the old principal of the First Men's Military Academy, but still, all he received was just a busy signal.

Ling Xiao's gaze had become extremely shadowed by this time. He lifted his head to order once more, "Submit a request to the other side. Tell them we will be arriving at planet Newline tomorrow and to please allow us safe passage."

The operator was taken aback, but he very quickly transmitted Ling Xiao's words over to the other side. A few seconds later, the other party responded and the operator immediately reported, "General, the other side answered that planet Newline is currently off-limits to all visitors. The ban will only be lifted three days later. They hope we will cooperate and change our flight plan or wait for the ban to lift."

"Something has really happened." By now, there was no longer any doubt in Ling Xiao's mind. His request had only been a probe — having just departed from planet Newline themselves, he naturally knew there was no so-called ban order for planet Newline.

"Activate a launch port immediately. I'm going to pilot <Belief> over to planet Newline." Ling Xiao leapt to his feet and rushed anxiously toward the hold doors. His daughter's life was in danger — how could he just sit here as a father? He needed to get over there as soon as possible. The speed of a god-class mecha was 4 times faster than a warship, and when pushed to high gear, it could go up to as much as 7 times faster.

"General, that's too dangerous!" Hearing what Ling Xiao planned to do, Adjutant Qiao

became flustered. He quickly rushed over as well to advise Ling Xiao against this plan of action.

Ling Xiao snapped his head around to glare fiercely at Adjutant Qiao, causing the other to cower instinctively. "This is an order!" Leaving these four words behind him, Ling Xiao vanished through the hold doors...

"Domain..." The highest ranked officer on the ship, a senior colonel, broke the shocked silence of the subdued crowd. Adjutant Qiao looked at the senior colonel and then looked at the rest of the crew, then, with a firm step, he once more chased after the general. As the adjutant to the general, he had to stop the general from taking this personal risk.

Chapter 360

The Mecha Storehouse!

Adjutant Qiao's departure made a subtle sneer tug at the corners of the senior colonel's lips, a trace of mockery flashing through his eyes. The general had already declared that this was an order, yet this Adjutant Qiao was being so obtuse — it looked like once they returned, Adjutant Qiao would probably be dismissed from service. The senior colonel walked over to the JMC's position and watched as the JMC carried out his guide duties and swiftly launched <Belief> with the general inside. <Belief> drew a trail of stars across the starry skies as it flew off in the direction of planet Newline. In just a few seconds, they could no longer see any sign of its figure...

On the screen, all that remained was the dejected Adjutant Qiao.

"Sir, what do we do now?" As the person holding the highest rank after the general, he was originally supposed to be the true leader of the assessment team, so the other officers naturally turned to him for direction.

"What to do? Of course we will follow the general to planet Newline. Also, send a report to the Federation mainframe about planet Newline being in danger," ordered the senior colonel. They could not let the general fight solo; they needed the mainframe to deploy a strong fleet over to assist as soon as possible. Although the senior colonel had faith in the general, it was always good to play it a little safe.

The senior colonel's words were greeted with enthusiastic agreement by the other officers. Thus, the military ship swiftly sent a report off to the Federation mainframe, changing directions at the same time to follow after Ling Xiao's mecha, flying rapidly towards planet Newline...



After rapid marching for more than 10 minutes, Ling Lan and her group of about 100 New Cadet Regiment members finally arrived at the exclusive mecha storehouse of the First Men's Military Academy. The storehouse stored various mecha of different grades, to be used during the practical training of control skills of the cadets. Usually,

these mecha would be sealed away in the storehouse and could not be easily accessed by the students.

"Boss, the storehouse doors have been broken open already. Someone has entered before us." Moving ahead of the others, Qi Long had led several others from Ling Lan's team to scout ahead. They were the first to make contact with the main doors of the mecha storehouse and had immediately noticed that the doors which should have been shut tight were actually unlatched and remained half-opened. Seeing this, Qi Long quickly ran back to where Ling Lan was to report this situation to her.

Ling Lan was taken aback by the news. Frowning, she thought, *'Could it be that someone had decided to do the same thing I was planning to do?'*

This speculation of Ling Lan's was based on the fact that the mecha within the mecha storehouse were all trainee mecha for students and not proper battle mecha. The weapons equipped on these mecha were only the most basic types, which had a much lower damage output than true battle mecha. Generally, soldiers would not choose to use mecha from the academy storehouse to fight. Furthermore, all the academy instructors had their own personal mecha and so would not come to retrieve any mecha from here either. The only possible candidates remaining were the academy cadets.

Ling Lan could not help but become curious over the student who had come to the same conclusion she had. Who were they? If she could befriend them, Ling Lan would not mind getting to know the student whose mind had walked the same path as hers.

As she was unsure about the situation inside the storehouse and was afraid that their entry would cause the party before them to misunderstand, Ling Lan asked the team leaders to pass on the word — when they entered the storehouse, the team members were to maintain silence and make as little noise as possible.

The storehouse doors were shoved wider by a few of them, and then the New Cadet Regiment began to slip inside in an orderly manner. The moment they entered the storehouse, they saw countless tall and formidable steel mecha standing before them. Everyone felt their heart rate pick up — they would soon be able to touch and use these great combat weapons.

Ling Lan glanced at the mecha right at the frontmost end of the storehouse and saw that they were all trainee mecha from the major three categories ¹. Besides the

requisite cold weapon, trainee mecha were not equipped with any long-range firearm. Ling Lan decisively turned away from these mecha — trainee mecha were just going to be sitting ducks; using them on the battlefield was just asking to die. She motioned for the New Cadet Regiment members to follow her onwards.

Because she had investigated beforehand, Ling Lan was well aware what level the members of the New Cadet Regiment who followed her were at in terms of control skills in the virtual world. Those trainee mecha operators and lower mecha operators had already been removed by her; all who remained were intermediate mecha operators and above.

It wasn't that Ling Lan looked down on those lower level students, but the combat power of a lower mecha operator was just too weak in a real battle. The death rate for low-level mecha operators was as high as 80%. Even though the 20% who managed to survive were likely to become strong fighters in their own right, the key point was that they needed to survive first.

Ling Lan felt that unnecessary death should be avoided. It would be best to wait for these students' skills to advance further before letting them go out and fight. That way, more would survive and the future would be just as lovely.

Therefore, in order to ensure their safety, Ling Lan decisively removed those lower level mecha operators from her group, only keeping those members who were at the level of intermediate mecha operator and above. This was another reason why this New Cadet Regiment group had suddenly shrunk by over 200 people. Those mecha operators who were able to become intermediate mecha operators in such a short amount of time were all certain to be outstanding in terms of talent and heart. As long as these people were baptised by war, they were sure to grow even faster!

The mecha storehouse was pitch dark and silent. They could not see the figures of those who had entered before them. When the first person of their group stepped into the mecha storehouse, the sensor light turned on automatically. The initially dark mecha storehouse was instantly bathed in bright light.

Although this situation startled the mentally unprepared students, they remembered Boss Lan's instructions and did not utter any sounds of shock. After that, seeing how steady their schoolmates were, they very quickly regained their composure. In the vast mecha storehouse, only the orderly sound of the New Cadet Regiment's footsteps could be heard.

Ling Lan led the way at a clipped pace for about 3 minutes, skipping past all the lower mecha sections along the way, and soon, they had arrived at the intermediate mecha section. Finally seeing some mecha which had several more types of long-range and close-range weapons, Ling Lan halted in satisfaction.

"Schoolmates, those who have already achieved intermediate mecha warrior status in Mecha World, please choose a mecha you are familiar with." Glancing at the time on her communicator, she instructed, "Remember, you all only have ten minutes to get used to your mecha. Once time is up, you all will be led out by your respective team leaders. Overall, we return to that same idea — keep your calm when you sight an enemy. Be mindful of teamwork; don't rush into the fray on your own. Also, work hard to return and see me again alive!"

"Yes, Regiment Commander!" Ling Lan's words reverberated in the silence of the storehouse, stoking the excitement of the near 80 students, causing them to shout loudly in response ².

With a wave of Ling Lan's right hand, these people swiftly boarded the mecha they aimed for respectively. Those mecha were the ones they were endlessly familiar with inside Mecha World. Of course, the mecha in Mecha World and the actual machines were sure to have some differences, but it was overall largely the same. Familiarising themselves with these mecha was not a very difficult thing — this was also why Ling Lan had only allocated them 10 minutes to adjust.

Of course, no one was dumb enough to go and select an unfamiliar mecha. Everyone understood that even if there were mecha much better than the one they piloted, they still could not choose it now. They would only be able to bring out the full capabilities of a mecha they were familiar with, and whether they could do so would be the key determining whether they lived or died on the battlefield.

Students who could make it into the Central Scout Academy were originally already an outstanding bunch, and among them, those who could even consider going into the First Men's Military Academy were the most exceptional of the group. They did not lack rationality or composure, so they knew what they should do.

Watching as these people began busying themselves adjusting to the real world mecha, Ling Lan nodded silently. She turned her head to look at the remaining students by her side. There were only 35 left. Other than her team's own 7 members, there were 28 other members. Twenty-one of these were the team leaders of the

various teams in the New Cadet Regiment.

As expected of those capable of being team leaders, they were all the most exceptional of the lot. Of the 27 teams within the New Cadet Regiment, only 6 team leaders were not yet at this level. Meanwhile, of the remaining 7 advanced mecha operators, 4 were members of Wu Jiong's team, which included Ye Xu, while the other 3 were from Li Yingjie's team. Without question, Wu Jiong's and Li Yingjie's team members were obviously stronger than those of the other teams.

Ling Lan mentally acknowledged the strength of Wu Jiong's and Li Yingjie's teams, but unbeknownst to her, in the eyes of the members of those two teams, Ling Lan's team was strong beyond understanding.

When they saw the seven people following closely behind Ling Lan as they walked over together to the advanced mecha section, their expressions could not help but shift, a trace of shock and awe appearing in their eyes. They were naturally astounded by the fact that all of the members of Ling Lan's team had actually managed to achieve advanced mecha warrior status. (At present, they still did not know about the three new members of Ling Lan's team, and so thought that Ling Lan's team still only consisted of the original six ³.) At the same time, they were utterly convinced — sure enough, Boss Ling Lan was Boss Ling Lan. Even the members under him were strong beyond reason. It made sense if you think about it. Boss Ling Lan was already so strong — if a team member was too weak, what right did he have to follow Ling Lan?

Just like that, Ling Lan led the 35 students into the advanced mecha section. Two more minutes passed and Ling Lan quickly urged the remaining members to board their selected mecha. The time this group had to adjust to the real mecha was only 8 minutes. As they wanted to meet up again with the members at the intermediate mecha section, they could only take 2 minutes out of their allocated adjustment time. That said, those who had advanced to advanced mecha operator at this age were all the extremely talented prodigies of mecha control. Eight minutes for them to familiarise themselves with real mecha was definitely no problem at all.

After settling all of this, Ling Lan ordered Little Four to contact Wu Jiong and Li Yingjie to tell them which section to come to. He sent the exact coordinates of their location in the storehouse to the two, preventing them from wasting time. After all, they too needed some time to adjust to the mecha — each extra second of adjustment time meant an increase in the chances of survival.

Fortunately, the direction of the anti-air shelter was roughly the same as the mecha storehouse, just at a slightly different angle. As Wu Jiong and Li Yingjie had left ahead of this party, they were not slowed down by much. Based off their reply, they had just arrived at the storehouse. At their speed, they should catch up within three minutes.

Ling Lan calculated for a moment — with Wu Jiong's and Li Yingjie's skills, the remaining 5 minutes' time was sufficient for them to adjust to real advanced mecha. At this thought, she relaxed and gave her team a heads up. She was planning to go to a secret room Little Four had discovered. That room was deeper into the storehouse, in the innermost area of the advanced mecha section. From the outside, it looked like they were already at the end of the section, but in truth, there was a whole new world behind that wall.

Chapter 361

Kings of Massacre!

Ling Lan's curiosity was piqued because, thus far, she had yet to come across a single person (or group) who had hit upon the same idea as she had but acted before she did. She did not notice any human figures within the storehouse, and neither was there any sign of mecha having been flown out. Thus, Ling Lan concluded that the other party was very likely still inside the secret room.

Ling Lan wondered why the other party had disregarded the advanced mecha all around them, instead choosing to enter that secret space. Was it that the secret space had some secret stashed within it? Could it be that it contained a special-class mecha or something even superior to that?

Even though Ling Lan felt that it was impossible for the military academy to possess combat mecha as terrifying as ace mecha, Ling Lan's curiosity could not be satisfied without taking a peek at what could be inside.

Since she was alone, Ling Lan unsealed all restrictions on her speed. If anyone had been next to her, they would have sensed that Ling Lan's movements were as fast as the wind. There was no way an average person's vision could keep up with her speed; all they might have sensed would have been a shadow flickering before their eyes, but in the next second, she would have disappeared without a trace.

Very soon, Ling Lan arrived at the end of the mecha hold, and the sight that greeted her was that of a broad wall. The average person arriving at this point would conclude that this was the end of the line and turn back. Ling Lan, however, strode forward and put her hands on the wall. Then, she bent her legs into a half-squat and, locking herself firmly into a horse stance while sinking her qi into her core, she forcefully moved both hands towards the right. On the petite forearm that peeked out of her sleeve, there appeared, shockingly, several bulging veins, a testament to the degree of force that Ling Lan was applying.

The 'ga-ga-ga' of gears locking teeth could be heard as the whole expanse of white wall was unbelievably shifted over a metre by Ling Lan through brute force, revealing a tunnel into which Ling Lan immediately darted. With a clap, the white wall returned

to its original position, looking once more like the unremarkable, seamless white wall it had appeared to be at the start.

"How dare they break the electric motorization systems inside!" Ling Lan exhaled as she darted into the tunnel. She only had to exert that much force because whoever had entered before her had dared to sabotage the electric motorization systems, probably to avoid detection. This had left Little Four no opportunity to put his skills to use, so relying on Ling Lan's brute force had been the only way to enter. If not for the fact that she had achieved half step to Domain, attempting to displace this entire stone wall weighing over 100,000 catties would have really been a tall order.

However, after entering the tunnel, Ling Lan's progress was exceptionally smooth, as the sabotage of the electric motorization systems had left the few other traps useless. After a minute and a half of quick running, Ling Lan came to the end of the tunnel where she was greeted by the sight of a tall, wide, thick and heavy steel slab of a door. Just as Ling Lan picked up her pace to get to it...

"Regiment Commander, are we really going to activate these mecha? If we're discovered by the military academy surveillance team, we're gonna get severely punished, possibly even expelled from the academy!" A shrill, panicky voice coming from the other side of the door was clearly projected into Ling Lan's ears.

Owing to the extreme destructive power of mecha, the military academy had always regulated them strictly. Unless a situation called for the need to pilot one, students were normally forbidden from interacting with the mecha freely. Now that the other side obviously intended to seize the opportunity amidst the chaos to take possession of mecha, the timid among them would inevitably be on tenterhooks.

Ling Lan instantly stalled her footsteps upon hearing this, her expression becoming wary. It looked like it was not going to be one person or even a few, as she had imagined, but a whole crowd to match her group in numbers.

"The military academy sounding the emergency alarm signalling an attack with no warning, that's not normal. To get a handle on the situation, I sent Xiao Yan to steal the ground troops' intelligence... you've all seen the information, it's grim out there. It could well be that a huge fight is about to go down. If we can't pilot the strongest mecha here, what's likely is that we will become the enemy's cannon fodder and I absolutely will not stand for it," said a cold, self-important voice. It was evident from the speaker's steely tone that they felt extremely pessimistic that the outcome of this

battle would favour the ground troops.

"When that happens, let alone the academy surveillance team, not even the military academy is guaranteed to survive," the frigid voice continued to explain.

The others fell silent at this speech, neither denying nor affirming it. It seemed like the military academy's strict rules still filled many of them with dread.

Just then, a boorish voice complained, "The regiment commander brought us here because he trusted us, and what he's saying is the plain truth. Don't you get it? If things go south, the regiment commander will bear even greater responsibility. If the regiment commander's not even scared, what are you all afraid of? Anyways, I don't want to die, nor do I want to become a captive of the enemy. Regiment Commander, I'm right behind you."

At the end of these words, many of them cheered loudly, quickly raising the morale and quashing the others' doubts. Ling Lan wondered, was the speaker just a mouthpiece for that regiment commander? Or did they truly put that much faith in their regiment commander?

"Since no one has any further objections, let's get into the mecha right away. We leave from this launch port in three minutes," the cold voice ordered without giving the others another chance to voice their opinions.

"Yes, Regiment Commander..." they responded in chorus, but then one voice abruptly raised a question. "Regiment Commander, aren't you going to inform Boss Huo and the others to join us?"

This gave Ling Lan a surprise; it seemed that these people were very likely of the Leiting Mecha Clan, which would make their regiment commander none other than the infamous Thunder King.

If it turned out to be that Thunder King... Ling Lan's gaze cooled slightly. It looked like she would have to be more cautious when she fought Leiting in the future. This Thunder King was an astute judge of circumstances. She had only dared to act because she had confirmation from Little Four. However, the Thunder King could only have acted after the alarm had sounded, boldly ordering his subordinates to steal the ground troops' intelligence, and then using extremely sparse information to determine the possible outcomes and taking the appropriate course of action... even

Ling Lan would hardly dare to be as decisive as the Thunder King without Little Four's help, possibly needing to ponder it a little more first. Ling Lan sensed the difference between herself and the Thunder King in terms of judging circumstances, acknowledging her inexperience.

As expected, one who could dominate the First Men's Military Academy was no fool! Ling Lan's gaze took on a sombre cast. The Thunder King, whom she had not thought much of previously, was now firmly noted by her.

"What we're doing now violates school regulations, so naturally the fewer who know about it the better. We're all people most trusted by Boss... If anyone else is informed about this, if news of it leaks by accident and the academy surveillance team finds out, they will come and stop us. When that happens, not a single one of us will get mecha." This answer to the earlier question did not come from the cold voice, but the boorish one which had first supported that leader.

The Thunder King did not explain anything, appearing to tacitly agree with what the boorish voice had said... Ling Lan could not help but furrow her brow briefly, disapproving of the Thunder King's response. Ling Lan believed that if a team was unable to endure through thick and thin together, it would only breed distrust and envy amongst themselves — by then there would be no need for such a team. If it couldn't be helped, one could take the blunt approach, and take those who were deemed unfit to be in the team and expel them... A leader allowing such distrust and envy to develop within his team, in Ling Lan's eyes, was a failure.

The explanation given by the boorish voice must have been accepted by the rest since no more talk was heard after that. Very soon, Ling Lan heard the sound of several mecha activating. Ling Lan listened closely for a while, then cross-checked Little Four's notes on the mecha and largely concluded that the mecha activated by these people were all special-class mecha.

Special-class mecha, despite being only half a level above advanced mecha in name, were as different as the sky from earth compared to advanced mecha due to this simple half-level. Operators of special-class mecha were already at the level of mecha master, whereas operators of advanced mecha could only be mecha warriors. If they were to enter a squad, an advanced mecha warrior's highest military rank would be senior captain while a special-class mecha master's rank would at least be major.

The knowledge that there were actually special-class mecha behind the metal door

made Ling Lan secretly happy. Being able to operate a slightly better mecha would allow her to more fully realize her combat ability, which was undoubtedly the best for her.

Even in her delight, Ling Lan did not forget to count the number of mecha that had been activated, eventually discovering that there were, in fact, no small number of men inside; fifteen by her estimates. Yet Ling Lan could not be certain if the Thunder King was among them. After all, it was rumoured that the Thunder King was already at ace level... Ling Lan was unsure if this military academy's storehouse contained the battlefield's Kings of Massacre — ace mecha.

Just then, a mecha that sounded different from the rest was suddenly activated. Hearing that, Ling Lan's expression was initially of surprise, followed quickly by joy, because she could tell that this new mecha activation sound most likely belonged to an ace mecha.

Could it be that, inside this military academy's storehouse, there really were ace mecha, the battlefield's Kings of Massacre? At this thought, Ling Lan's heart surged. Even Ling Lan could not resist the temptation of a chance to operate the battlefield's Kings of Massacre.

Ling Lan's flare of excitement lasted for only a moment. She quickly calmed down and began withdrawing her presence, even activating her innate talent to cause her body to become as cold as ice, practically wiping out her original body heat.

Ling Lan had not forgotten that there were many kinds of automatic scanning features equipped on an ace mecha, one of which was thermal scanning. Once anything was discovered by the mecha, it would proactively warn the operator. This was also one of the reasons why ace mecha could become the kings of the battlefield.

Of course, the various fittings on imperial mecha and god-class mecha were definitely more powerful than those on an ace mecha, but it was precisely because they were too powerful, their destructive power too terrifying — it was said that even one attack by an imperial mecha would be able to turn an area several hundred li in circumference into a wasteland, not to mention the capabilities of god-class mecha which represented the ultimate might of a nation — that unless it was a matter that shook the very foundations of the country, they could only be used as a force for deterrence and would not really be deployed as the main force in a battle...

All this was because even though humans had built weapons with such terrifying destructive power, they were also frightened of the weapons' might at the same time. In order to restrict other nations from deploying these terrifying weapons, all galactic nations in the human world entered into an agreement that, on the battlefield, it was absolutely forbidden to allow those ultimate weapons above the level of ace mecha to show up...

This was why ace mecha were known as the Kings of Massacre — they were the most powerful weapons allowed on the battlefield. It could be said that the number of ace operators and the extent of their abilities would determine the final victor or loser in a war.

Chapter 362

Thunder King Qiao Ting!

Ling Lan carefully controlled her body temperature. At this time, she was quite grateful that her innate talent was Ice Affinity, allowing her to make her body temperature match the temperature of the surroundings or even lower. If she had not had this ability, her only option right now would have been to retreat out of the tunnel immediately.

"Eh?" A surprised cry suddenly rang out from behind the metal door. This gave Ling Lan a fright as she thought she had been discovered.

This surprised cry was even louder than the voices of conversation prior to this. Ling Lan knew that the other must have been using the speakers of the mecha so that all the other mecha masters could hear him. This was the reality without the presence of cheat code Little Four — members from different battle clans could not use the clan-specific comms channel to communicate. This proved that these people were not all from the same battle clan.

"Regiment Commander, what's wrong?" Hearing this startled cry, everyone inside the room reflexively paused, and someone soon spoke up to ask.

"I found that there is quite a crowd now in the advanced mecha section at the front of the storehouse. Quite a few mecha have already been activated," their regiment commander replied. It looked like after he successfully activated the ace mecha, he had discovered the situation in the mecha storehouse under the sensor prompting of the mecha A.I...

"Actually having the same idea as us? Looks like quite a few people have come to the same conclusion as you, Regiment Commander, not optimistic about the outcome of this battle," someone suddenly exclaimed.

"The military academy is a lair of crouching tigers and hidden dragons ¹ — for someone to think the same as me is not unusual," responded the regiment commander dispassionately. This injected explanation from the side dampened his curiosity quite a bit. Moreover, those others were only within the mecha storehouse area and had

only gotten as far as the advanced mecha section at most. It could be imagined that these people were not very high level in terms of mecha operation. If they were already at the level of special-class operator, they should have managed to make their way to this area.

With this thought, the regiment commander tossed his discovery of these people to the back of his mind. He paused and then asked those present, "Are you all ready? If everything is ready, I'll activate the launch port tunnel now."

"Regiment Commander, I'm OK!"

"Regiment Commander, I'm ready."

"Regiment Commander, everything is good to go."

Soon, there was a messy chorus of responses. Seeing everyone give the OK, the regiment commander activated the launch port.

Ling Lan sensed that the regiment commander's attention was no longer on the outside, so she silently asked Little Four whether he could project the situation inside to her. Little Four told her it was no problem — Ling Lan's current level of spiritual power was enough to support this distance of long-range infiltration. Not long after, a video feed of the situation inside was displayed in Ling Lan's mind-space.

Inside the metal doors, it was still an extremely vast mecha storehouse. To both sides of the doors were many neat rows of black mecha. Although there were some minor alterations in particular spots on these mecha, overall, they were largely the same. Each mecha gave off a strong sense of fearsome power.

Ling Lan did a rough count. Each side had about 80 mecha, so there were about 160 mecha total. It could be guaranteed that in the entire academy, there were actually not that many students who had already achieved special-class operator status. Based on a distribution of one person per mecha, there would at most be 160 people or so. Besides, the military academy would of course prepare a few extra just in case. Otherwise, if someone suddenly advanced to special-class operator status, without a special-class mecha to match, the title of First Men's Military Academy would truly become a joke.

Ling Lan was now well aware that this type of black mecha that differed from the standard Federation mecha was actually the Federation's special-class mecha. At

special class, mecha would begin to display signs of personalisation. This was because at this stage, the skills and techniques of operators would shift from the original regulated movements into their own personalised style of operation. However, at this point, their style would not be properly developed yet. As regular advanced mecha could only accept standard commands, they could not satisfy the demands of an operator's personalised operation style. Yet an ace mecha provided too much freedom in its controls that a special-class operator who had just stepped into the world of personalised operation would not be able to handle it well.

Under these circumstances, in order for these exceptional control seedlings to smoothly break through and advance to ace mecha master status, after much dedicated research and design by several generations of mecha engineers, the Federation finally created this sort of special-class mecha to bridge the gap between advanced mecha and ace mecha. Thus, special-class mecha were not completely outside the scope of standardised mecha, but at the same time, they also possessed some individualistic characteristics like ace mecha.

Back during the assassination attempt on Ling Lan when she was six, that team of black mecha which had appeared to help her was in fact a Federation mecha battle clan of special-class operators. However, up till now, Ling Lan still had not been able to find out who it was exactly who had helped her.

Ling Lan saw these tall and mighty mecha, and she understood why this secret storehouse needed to be installed with a launch tunnel of its own. The passage she had entered to get here did not have enough height or room to let these mecha walk out.

Of course, what made Ling Lan drool with want was not these mecha; right across from the metal doors stood a row of just five mecha. Each of these mecha looked different, possessing clearly unique characteristics of its own. One of these mecha had already been activated at present and had been piloted out of its original fixed secured dock.

Ling Lan saw a long-range laser gun, which was about two-thirds the mecha's height, slung across the mecha's back, as well as a standard beam gun equipped on the mecha, and she knew that this mecha was primarily a long-range attack type.

That aside, the launch port the other had mentioned was to the right-hand side of the metal doors. There was a circular tunnel there with enough space inside to

accommodate four mecha. Right now, the access door to the tunnel had been opened. A special-class mecha at the forefront walked through it and the access door was quickly shut. When the three warning lights over the door all turned green, a deep, dull sound could be heard...

"Boom!" Ling Lan felt a strong shockwave rush over her where she stood. Immediately afterwards, the mecha inside the launch port was launched high up into the air by a large force, springing up several dozens of metres in one shot. In the instant it was launched into the air, the mecha's engines began to roar. Borrowing the force from the launch and the power of its thrusters, the mecha instantly shot out from the launch port tunnel to fly above the military academy...

It looked like the people of Leiting were already familiar with this type of launch system. They walked into the port one by one to be launched into the skies. The final one to enter the port was the regiment commander controlling the ace mecha. Recalling the rumours she had heard a while back, Ling Lan could already confirm that this regiment commander must be the Thunder King Qiao Ting who had successfully advanced to become an ace operator.

For some reason, after Qiao Ting had entered the tunnel, right when the automatic doors were about to close, the head of his mecha abruptly turned to look in the direction of the metal doors. This unexpected action startled Ling Lan — had the other sensed her?

Very soon, the automatic doors slid shut and she could no longer see the silhouette of the mecha. As expected, a few seconds later, Qiao Ting was launched out of the port like the other special-class operators. Only then did Ling Lan relax.

Still, just to be sure, Ling Lan quietly waited for about a minute before approaching the metal door. Little Four checked and found that the electrical systems of this metal door had not been tampered with. Perhaps after reaching this point, the other party had been afraid that the launch port inside the room would be affected if they destroyed the systems here. Thus, they had chosen to enter normally without applying brute force.

As long as the systems were working normally, Ling Lan could just walk in easy as a breeze with the help of the cheat code Little Four. As she passed by the special-class mecha, she found herself feeling somewhat regretful that none of the New Cadet Regiment members had reached the level of special-class operator. She suddenly

thought of that special-class operator friend of the leopard — if he joined her team, then he would have been able to come operate these mecha.

Ling Lan's aim right now was naturally not the special-class mecha; her objective was those few ace mecha. Being able to operate an ace mecha in real life was something Ling Lan had been dreaming of. Back then on planet Demonbeast, the mecha Ling Lan had been operating was actually not an ace mecha but a special-class mecha.

In the military, special-class mecha were lumped together under the term ace mecha, with only the words 'secondary' or 'substitute' added to the title. Those three 'ace' mecha she had finished off then had also only been special-class operators of Twilight. After a period of baptism in war, special-class operators would gradually form and perfect their individual operation style and techniques, which would allow them to officially ascend to ace operator status. This was why they were called 'substitute aces' by the ground forces.

It should be said that Ling Lan was very lucky that she had not truly encountered true ace operators back then. Otherwise, with her barely formed operation style, even if she had only been up against one battle-experienced ace operator, she would have been hard-pressed to win, not to mention that she had been up against three mecha operators back then.

Since Qiao Ting had taken one of the ace mecha, there were only four mecha remaining. Still, Ling Lan was transfixed by them, staring at them with abnormal excitement.

Aside from appearing humanoid like the other mecha, the leftmost mecha had two wings sprouting from its back at a diagonal angle. Based on Ling Lan's knowledge, this should be a transformer-type mecha. In other words, it would become a humanoid mecha at close range, and transform into a flying mecha when attacking at long range. It could be considered one of the more balanced mecha.

This mecha's specialty was speed. None of the other ace mecha here would be able to match it in terms of speed; even its close-range combat manoeuvres would be based on speed. However, what would showcase its speed best was when it transformed into its aviation mode. At that time, putting its entire power into it, at top speed, it would be able to draw away or pull in close in an instant.

This would guarantee that an enemy would be unable to ditch it regardless if they

were close-range mecha or long-range mecha. At the same time, this speed was also a means of protection. Whenever its operator found themselves on the losing end, they would be able to pull away swiftly and escape from the opponent's attack range. If a common mecha were to meet this type of mecha in battle, it would be destroyed by it without having any chance to counterattack at all. As for its long-range capabilities, other than that long-range humanoid mecha Qiao Ting had piloted away, only the bestial mecha known as the <King of Ground Combat> might have some advantage against it.

The second mecha in the line-up was precisely the mecha that was just mentioned previously. It was the mecha that might overpower the transformer ace mecha by a head in terms of long-range attacks — the bestial ace mecha <King of Ground Combat>.

Chapter 363

<King of Close Combat>!

This kind of mecha displayed the characteristics of its bestial form, possessing four thick and strong limbs. The power these limbs could produce were explosively strong — in close-range combat, its power would completely overwhelm humanoid mecha. As for what kind of bestial form it would take, that depended on the operator's preference. This mecha before Ling Lan was in the form of a kingly lion.

The only shortcoming of this bestial mecha was that it could not enter high altitudes or outer space — the thrust force of its engines would only allow it to fight at a maximum altitude of 50 metres. However, by abandoning high-altitude flight, its ground attack capabilities were greatly increased. It had powerful strength at its disposal in close-range combat — a humanoid mecha would have no way of standing up against the impact of its charges. The only thing capable of putting up some resistance were humanoid ace mecha which specialised in close-range combat.

With regards to long-range attack capability, two long-range laser cannons hung on the bestial mecha's back. The range of these long-range laser cannons far exceeded that of ordinary beam guns and long-range laser guns. Thus, when it came to long-range attack distance, before a humanoid mecha could attack it, this mecha would already be able to attack first.

Although this bestial mecha was very formidable in both close-range combat and long-range combat on the ground, hence its name of <King of Ground Combat>, there still were not many ace operators who would choose it. This was because, just like its title said, it was only the king of ground combat. Nowadays, a majority of battles were conducted in outer space or high up in the air. On these two fronts, this bestial mecha was significantly limited. The moment it entered those types of battlefields, it was certain to be crushed by humanoid mecha.

The third mecha in the line had been the long-range attack mecha that Qiao Ting had taken. Although its shooting range was less than bestial mecha's, it was greater than other types of ace mecha. Especially in a space battle, no mecha could compete with its long-range attacks, and at the same time, it was also second in terms of speed, only

slightly weaker than the transformer mecha — no other mecha could compare. This type of mecha boasted the second-best survival rate (the first being transformer mecha) and it was also the second-best at accomplishing tasks. In terms of overall strength, this mecha ranked first.

The fourth mecha had obviously thicker limbs than other humanoid mecha. There were two swords attached to its back — one was a heat-based weapon, a beam saber with powerful energy, while the other was a cold weapon, a broadsword which could deal the strongest physical damage. Just by looking at it, one could tell that this was a mecha specialising in close-range combat, otherwise it would not have been equipped with two melee weapons.

Let's leave the beam saber aside for the moment and just look at that broadsword. With a blade width of about a metre and a centre thickness of about 50 centimetres, it was clear to see that this was definitely an extremely heavyweight cold weapon, unparalleled in its dominance. One swing of this sword would be able to break the outer shell of a mecha, as long as enough force was put behind it. Because the equipped defence for mecha in general were beam shields, the defence threshold of mecha against firearms was the highest, while their defence threshold against cold weapons was the weakest. This was also why cold weapons had not been eliminated from the arsenal of mecha.

The close-range mecha was the strongest when it came to close-range combat. On the ground, the difference between its strength and bestial mecha was pretty much negligible. It only lacked long-range attack capabilities, but if it managed to get close in the skies or in space, victory was basically determined. Thus, a close-range mecha on the battlefield would oftentimes receive the most battle accolades. However, its survival ratings were also the lowest compared to other ace mecha. Still, as long as its operator lived, this type of mecha was also usually the main mecha type to advance to imperial level. For this reason, the Federation soldiers called it the <King of Close Combat>!

Ling Lan fell deeply in love with this mecha at first sight — her eyes shone with an intense need to possess it. She desperately wanted to board this mecha. This was closely related to how much Ling Lan loved close-range combat; even in mecha, Ling Lan still preferred fighting at close range.

However, Ling Lan suppressed her bucking enthusiasm to look over at the fifth mecha. The fifth mecha was very strange. Mecha usually sported a suspension system on their

backs for the purpose of hanging various long-range or close-range weapons. But this mecha did not have that. Its back was directly affixed with a thick and sturdy round metal object, somewhat reminiscent of a turtle's shell. However, this turtle shell had several additional pipes running across it horizontally and vertically, spread out across the shell like green veins. Ling Lan counted closely and found that there were three on each side, six pipes in total, while two more ran across the top, bringing the grand total of pipes to eight.

At first, Ling Lan was rather bewildered, unsure what kind of ace mecha this was. Luckily, Little Four swept in to help once more, instantly searching out a similar mecha type from his databases. Only then did they learn that this type of mecha was called an artillery type mecha. It could be said that this type of mecha was equivalent to a small mobile attack bastion. Its firepower was the most powerful among all the ace mecha. The eight artillery barrels could automatically adjust themselves to lock on to a target and shoot. Basically, even an ace mecha would find it difficult to fend against the simultaneous fire of its eight barrels. This type of mecha was suitable for large-scale space battles. Each time it attacked, it would be able to annihilate a large batch of enemy mecha, hence it was also known as the <King of Star Space>.

But it also had a fatal weakness — because of its own burdened weight, its speed was the worst among all the ace mecha, making it very easy for an enemy to draw close. Once it let an enemy get close, especially if it were the <King of Close Combat> which was an ace mecha just like itself that managed the feat, its end would pretty much be decided. Thus, once it moved, it needed another ace mecha or eight special-class mecha to accompany it and protect it. That is, those escort mecha would need to step in at critical moments to intercept other ace mecha from getting close.

Ling Lan decisively cast aside the fifth mecha from consideration. Ling Lan was not at all interested in this type of mecha which relied on its configuration and build to win; only those mecha that required control skill would make her feel challenged. Ling Lan decisively returned to stand below the fourth mecha. Leaping upwards, she used both her hands and legs at together to climb swiftly up the mecha and pulled the lever to open the cockpit.

A click rang out as the cockpit was opened, and an opening that would allow easy access to an adult was revealed. Ling Lan bent over to take a quick look inside before jumping in, where she then immediately sat down.

Ling Lan closed the cockpit doors and the lights dimmed. Immediately after that, Ling

Lan pressed on the activation button of the mecha. The cockpit lit up once more, and at the same time, in the control seat, a safety belt popped up automatically to bind Ling Lan's body securely. This was to prevent the intense vibrations from piloting the mecha from harming the operator.

"A.I. activated. Checking in progress. Please wait! The estimated time for this check is two minutes. If emergency activation is necessary, please press the emergency activation button." The mecha A.I. followed its procedural settings, voicing out the notifications to alert the operator.

This was the first time Ling Lan was using this mecha, and the situation was not urgent, so she naturally chose regular activation. This time, she was going forth into a treacherous battlefield where the chances of survival were slim, so it was necessary to guarantee as much safety as possible. If she missed out on discovering any hidden problems on the mecha just because she wanted to save these two minutes, it would be too late for Ling Lan to cry later if anything happened.

Ling Lan was a calm and rational person; she naturally would not allow herself to be put into such a dangerous position. She patiently waited for the two-minute activation check to run its course, and only after confirming that everything was normal with the mecha did she begin operating it.

"Little Four, from now on, begin taking over for the A.I... We must not let the computer retain any battle data of me in the following battle." Mecha possessed auto-saving functions. For one, its recordings were used as proof of an operator's battle merits, and two, it was also useful in helping mecha mechanics adjust and modify mecha based on an operator's habits to make a mecha more in line with the needs of its operator.

Of course, the recording function of the military academy mecha was to facilitate the instructors of the academy in checking the control skills of the cadets. If there were any flaws or weaknesses captured in the video, the instructors would be able to immediately correct the students and fix those issues.

Ling Lan knew very well that when the fighting ended and the military academy's monitoring systems came back online, it would definitely investigate these mecha which had been used in the battle. And these saved recordings of the fight would be the evidence they would pore over. Ling Lan did not wish to expose herself to the administrators of the academy. Even if it was just as Ling Xiao's son, she did not want

that to happen.

Just imagine, even someone as powerful as her dad Ling Xiao had been unable to resist the schemes and backstabbing from within the military itself. If the military found out that Ling Xiao's son was also a mecha piloting prodigy like him, Ling Lan did not believe that those people who had set up Ling Xiao would be content to sit back. If by any chance they felt that they could not allow Ling Xiao and his child to continue growing, not only would she be in danger, Ling Xiao's safety may also be put at risk.

Ling Lan naturally knew that Ling Xiao was very strong, but she did not believe that Ling Xiao had enough power to fend against treachery from those who may be friends. This recent period together had let Ling Lan know that Ling Xiao was someone who treasured emotions deeply. Unless he was absolutely certain that the other had truly betrayed him, Ling Xiao would not actively suspect his friends.

This was a strength of Ling Xiao but also a weakness — even as Ling Lan respected Ling Xiao for it, she could not help but worry for him. Thus, till now, she still did not dare to let Ling Xiao know of her true strength and abilities. She was worried that in his joy, Ling Xiao would run and tell his so-called friends about it...

At the heart of it all, Ling Lan was still concerned about the high-ranking person hidden within the depth of the military who had almost killed Ling Xiao. Being able to arrange all of that so naturally, without flaws, Ling Lan believed that only the few great marshals or the great generals would be able to do so. It may even be the result of several people working together... so, even if Ling Xiao was extremely trusting of the First Marshal, Ling Lan was actually very suspicious of the other deep inside.

"Got it, Boss!" Little Four responded excitedly when he heard Ling Lan's instructions, as she had always restricted Little Four from interfering with matters of mecha; now, she was finally letting him help. This made Little Four feel that he was truly able to help Boss now... did this mean that he was well-deserving of his position as number one follower now?

Little Four carried this smug happiness and excitement with him as he took over the administrative rights of the mecha's A.I... The first step would be to screen the recording function of the mecha.

Little Four understood that his boss did not intend to turn off the recording system completely, otherwise Ling Lan could just have turned off the system herself without

needing him to step in. Ling Lan had ordered him to get involved because she wanted to utilise Little Four's ability to create false images, to let the mecha indicate that no one had piloted the mecha. In other words, no one would be able to discover from the recording system that this mecha had ever been used in this battle.

Chapter 364

Prepare to Fight!

Having resolved this concern, Ling Lan decided that she would let loose in this battle. She sent out a mass text to all her team members, telling them that she was going to act alone from this point on. She tasked Qi Long with the responsibility of leading the team members into battle, and specially pointed out to him that if he were to encounter any issues he could not resolve on his own, he could look for Li Lanfeng and Han Jijyun for advice.

The partnership of Qi Long's brawn and Han Jijyun's brain had been intentionally cultivated by Ling Lan. However, when Ling Lan was sending off the text to Qi Long, she suddenly thought of Li Lanfeng. Over this period of interaction, Ling Lan had a good look at Li Lanfeng's abilities, and she found that he had some strengths Han Jijyun did not. If Han Jijyun could be said to be a wise man on the path of righteousness, then Li Lanfeng was the mastermind on the path of grey areas and side channels. Li Lanfeng would often think of some plans that Han Jijyun would never have considered. On the battlefield, there was no doubt that Li Lanfeng was more likely to keep the team alive.

At this thought, Ling Lan had decisively added Li Lanfeng's name to her instructions. Ling Lan believed that with both Li Lanfeng and Han Jijyun helping Qi Long to strategize, there would be no problem at all for the team members to survive this battle.

Li Lanfeng had only needed 2 to 3 minutes time to familiarise himself with the advanced mecha he had chosen. This was because he had already used real mecha before, a year ago. Thus, he was not troubled by the difficulties of adjusting from virtual mecha to real mecha like the other New Cadet Regiment members.

This was likewise for Li Shiyu; the difference between those with experience and those without was clearly evident at this moment. However, because the two of them were there, whenever Qi Long and the others had anything they did not understand, they could quickly receive an answer. This cut short the time they needed to figure things out by trial and error, allowing them to grasp the controls of their mecha faster than

other people.

The team members received Ling Lan's message at almost the same time. Seeing that Ling Lan wanted to act alone, though Qi Long and the others had been mentally prepared for this, they still could not help but feel somewhat dejected. After all, with Boss around, they would feel that much more reassured.

Right after that, Qi Long conveyed Ling Lan's decision to Li Lanfeng, telling him that he was to work with Han Jijyun to help him arrange the team's battle strategy. When Li Lanfeng heard this, he was very moved but also felt deeply downhearted.

Ling Lan's decision let Li Lanfeng feel how much Ling Lan trusted him, letting him know that his rabbit sincerely cherished him. But he still felt crestfallen, because when it came time to truly go onto the battlefield, he still was not qualified enough to stand by Ling Lan's side. Obviously, this arrangement of Ling Lan's was in large part due to the fact that they were currently unable to keep up with him.

Perhaps, the rabbit's control technique was already at the level of special-class operator... Li Lanfeng recalled his good friend Zhao Jun telling him that in a hidden room deep within the storehouse, there was a space dedicated for the storage of special-class mecha. Perhaps the rabbit had gone there. He felt a little regretful — if he had known in advance, he would not have been so stubborn about sticking with his foundational controls, refusing to advance to special-class together with Zhao Jun. If he had given up on his principles then and advanced to special-class operator, perhaps he would have had the chance to fight by the rabbit's side in the present situation.

Inexplicably, every time Li Lanfeng was by the rabbit's side, he would feel very relaxed. The looming destiny of his that was pressing down and suffocating him felt less heavy in the other's presence. He even got the feeling that changing his fate was not as hopeless as it seemed. Having borne the burden of his fate alone for twenty years, he too had moments when he felt tired, unable to cope and desirous of rest, so he especially treasured and yearned for this feeling.

Li Lanfeng did not want to take even a half step away from the rabbit. He felt that if he let the rabbit leave his life once again, he would really be crushed by this fate of his.

"I must completely master these basic controls as soon as possible..." Li Lanfeng's low spirits only lasted for a brief instant. He had very quickly remembered that the rabbit was very particular about the basic controls — looking at Qi Long's and the others'

controls, it was clear that their foundations were all very solid. If he had chosen to take the shortcut back then, the rabbit definitely would not have reacted favourably. Li Lanfeng secretly tamped down on his insecurities and silently warned himself to never ever cross over into the forbidden territory of the rabbit... However, in order to make up the gap between himself and the rabbit, Li Lanfeng decided to double the practice load of his already doubled practice load on the basics...

While Li Lanfeng was tangled up in his own thoughts, the time limit Ling Lan had set for them to adjust to the real mecha crept up upon them. Wu Jiong and Li Yingjie, who had arrived a few minutes later than Qi Long and the others, also seized this last bit of time to activate their selected advanced mecha and tested them out to adjust properly.

Seeing that the time limit had elapsed, Wu Jiong controlled his mecha to make a hand motion at Qi Long's and Li Yingjie's mecha, asking whether they were to go out now.

Qi Long and Li Yingjie both responded with affirmative gestures. Just like that, the three of them led the thirty or so advanced mecha to head out of the mecha storehouse. When the mecha in the intermediate mecha section saw the regiment commanders and team leaders walking out in their advanced mecha, without needing any orders, they fell into line behind their respective team leaders to move forwards in an orderly manner.

Perhaps because 100 or so mecha were walking out of the warehouse at the same time, a minor quake actually ran through the ground as they moved. However, the fighting had not spread to this area yet, so there were no enemies around to notice and discover this batch of mecha walking out from the storehouse.

All the team leaders did not say much, only reminding their team members to choose their pre-set frequencies as their team comms channel to communicate. Before they had come here, they had already discussed what they should do.

Very soon, all of the mecha had arrived at the open grounds outside. Qi Long issued a command, and the various teams dispersed swiftly, each moving in a different direction.

As the only non-ex-Central Scout Academy team there, it was clear to see that Gao Jinyun's team was rather strong since they were able to keep a full team together. However, Gao Jinyun looked over at the 30 or so advanced mecha in the distance and then looked back at the intermediate mecha he was piloting, and he could not help but

feel rather disheartened.

Gao Jinyun had been convinced to submit by Ling Lan's unfathomable strength and daring strategy during the operation to take over the ship of the military academy. After entering the academy, he was even more set in his determination to follow Ling Lan and had joined the New Cadet Regiment. Of course, part of the reason he had first joined was out of some minor intention to lean back against a big tree and enjoy its shade ¹. However, following the results of the wagered fight with Leiting, Gao Jinyun had thoroughly thrown aside that little bit of selfish motive, deciding to follow Ling Lan with his full heart and soul.

Gao Jinyun was a proud person. Originally from Doha as well, although he had not been able to get into the Central Scout Academy, he had still been one of the strongest in his own scout academy. He thought that even if he could not compare to those few regiment commanders of the New Cadet Regiment, he should at least not be that much weaker than the other team leaders. But today, he was once again dealt a mental blow. Who would have expected those team leaders from the same scout academy as Ling Lan to be so strong? In such a short amount of time, they were now able to operate advanced mecha? (Gao Jinyun did not expect the other side to have broken past the barrier at 13 years old to enter the virtual world and begin learning mecha controls early ². This was definitely a beautiful misunderstanding.)

"Sure enough, there will always be a mountain higher ³. I was still overconfident before." Gao Jinyun chuckled bitterly inside his heart. This experience had smacked him awake, clearing his mind — even though he had been the strongest in his own scout academy previously, here at the First Men's Military Academy which gathered all the best and brightest, he was still greatly lacking...

However, Gao Jinyun would not just admit defeat like this. He decided that he would work harder to train up his mecha controls and chase up to those team leaders as soon as possible. Losing to Boss Lan, Gao Jinyun was resigned to it. Losing to those other regiment commanders, he could still justify to himself that those were after all the regiment commanders. But losing to those other people who were team leaders like him, Gao Jinyun could not pardon himself. He still remembered the grand ambitions he had back when he had managed to enrol into the First Men's Military Academy — he had been determined to become part of the most outstanding batch of people within the military academy.

Just as Gao Jinyun was brimming with fighting spirit, a sound startled him out of his

thoughts...

"Third Elder Brother, are we really going to operate mecha into battle?" One of the members of his team asked with a dreamy expression on his face.

"Godd*mmmit, don't use the external speakers, use the team comms." Gao Jinyun could not help but scold when he saw his team member making a mistake. Luckily, this was not yet at the war zone, otherwise this behaviour of his team member would absolutely have been akin to asking for death.

As they still were not a battle clan, they did not have an exclusive private battle clan comms channel protected by a password. Their so-called team comms was just them choosing to communicate on the same radio frequency without any security measures, so it would be very easily cracked by hackers. Still, the situation was urgent, so they could only make do for now.

Amidst the panicked noises of the team member in question, he finally switched his voice output over into the team comms channel. Only then did Gao Jinyun breathe a sigh of relief, but his brow soon scrunched up in worry again.

His team member's immature performance made him concerned. At this moment, he felt a little regretful for not removing one member whose control skills were still not very well developed just so he could keep his team in formation. Mind you, Ling Lan's original requirement was for team members proficient in controlling intermediate mecha and above. Only such members were qualified to follow him onto the battlefield and engage in mecha combat.

"Xiao Jiang, you aren't fully proficient in your control skills yet. Once we start fighting, first protect yourself well. Only attack from long-range when you find appropriate timings." After some thought, Gao Jinyun came up with this arrangement. Since he had already led his member here, he needed to take responsibility for him.

"Okay, Third Elder Brother." Xiao Jiang heard Gao Jinyun's arrangements and his nervousness abated. Honestly speaking, he really wasn't confident at all in piloting a mecha into close-range combat.

Gao Jinyun set up every member's position and then led his members in a sprint towards the battlefield. Knowing his own team was relatively weaker, Gao Jinyun did not bring his team to the dormitory district which was a chaotic mess, swarming with

enemies. Instead, he led them in the opposite direction.

It should be said that there was nothing wrong with Gao Jinyun's decision. After all, the more chaotic an area was, the easier it was for accidents to happen. However, he just did not consider that those enemy mecha who appeared to be fighting alone were often those formidable combat experts filled with confidence in their own skills, which was why they dared to go off on their own to begin with...

"Third Elder Brother, there is an enemy mecha ahead. Our scanner feedback indicates that it's an advanced mecha!" The team member in the lead who was responsible for scouting ahead suddenly warned the team.

Gao Jinyun had only received the news and had yet to make a decision when the enemy mecha noticed them and came charging over ferociously. Gao Jinyun knew that in terms of speed, intermediate mecha were no match for advanced mecha. If they chose to run, they were likely to be taken down one by one by the opponent. As such, they might as well fight with their lives on the line — perhaps by relying on teamwork, they might be able to bring down this enemy mecha.

These thoughts went by in a flash through Gao Jinyun's mind. He firmly declared, "Prepare to fight!"

Chapter 365

The Owner of the Giant Sword!

With tacit understanding and rapport, the team members got into their positions. With Gao Jinyun as point, they formed a diamond array, the beam guns in their right hands raised in unplanned synchronicity. In Mecha World, every time they fought, they had always worked together this way. Habit became nature — in the real world, in this first real battle, all of them chose to fight using this formation they were most familiar with.

"Fire!" shouted Gao Jinyun, taking the lead in pulling the trigger of his beam gun.

Six beams were fired altogether at the enemy mecha — if this were Mecha World, up against the mecha in the game system, at least one or two of their beams would have hit their target. But right now, the opponent they were up against was an advanced mecha warrior with a wealth of battle experience. Facing off against this type of straightforward beam shots, the veteran enemy mecha operator could dodge all six shots easily.

The opponent executed some graceful Z-shaped footwork, evading five of the shots in an instant. The only one he could not dodge was the shot by Gao Jinyun, because Gao Jinyun had fired his shot based on predictive movement trajectory. This was considered one of the more advanced techniques of intermediate mecha operators — he had calculated the reactions the enemy might make and then fired at a position the enemy was likely to move into to evade. Thus, the enemy mecha did not manage to evade Gao Jinyun's shot.

After evading five of the shots, the enemy mecha found that one beam was bloody irritatingly shooting at the position he had evaded into. As dodging required some adjustments, it was impossible to dodge once more, so the enemy mecha instantly activated its beam shield to bear the brunt of Gao Jinyun's beam attack. After that, it leapt aggressively at them, prepared to finish off these small fries at close range.

Seeing their first attack dodged so easily by the enemy, some of the team members could not help but become flustered. Gao Jinyun yelled, "Continue shooting!"

This cry calmed the team members down instantly. They listened to their leader and pressed down forcefully on the firing button in their hands. Beams poured in a torrent from the muzzles of their guns, hurtling towards the enemy mecha...

This round of frenzied attacks was effective, causing the enemy mecha to become wary and choose to dodge, stopping his frontal attack. He could see that although this group of intermediate mecha's behaviour seemed rather green, their teamwork and rapport were unusually good. This frustrated him, and in the end, he could only choose to dodge.

Gao Jinyun's team witnessed as the enemy mecha took several back leaps while evading, swiftly pulling away from them. In the blink of an eye, the enemy mecha had been swallowed by the night, disappearing without a trace.

Seeing this, Gao Jinyun lowered his beam gun in confusion. Based on the opponent's abilities, no matter how fiercely they attacked, they would have been merely delaying the inevitable. If the opponent had wanted to push forwards anyway, he would have been able to, although that would have damaged the other's mecha somewhat...

Could it be that the enemy was afraid of his mecha being damaged without there being anywhere to conduct repairs? Thus, worried that this would then affect him in combat later on, he had chosen to retreat? Gao Jinyun felt that this was a likely possibility. After all, this was their home territory.

"Third Elder Brother, I can't believe we actually sent him running. So that's all there is to an advanced mecha..." commented one of the clueless team members.

"How could that be? If he really wanted to finish us off, he would have been able to achieve it with just some minor price. The opponent decided to avoid the confrontation probably because he did not want to pay anything..." rebuked Gao Jinyun. When he mentioned 'not wanting to pay any price', a flash of insight passed through his brain and his initial confusion was suddenly given an answer. He shouted anxiously, "Everyone turn on your radar! The enemy could still be here..."

He had barely finished speaking when Gao Jinyun sensed a strong force rushing at them from his right side. His mecha was blaring an alarm as soon as it picked up the attack — even as Gao Jinyun yelled for his team members to run, he quickly operated his mecha to shove and kick aside two of his team members with a hand and a leg respectively.

A tremendous 'boom' rang out and the beam that had appeared so suddenly struck the activated beam shield of Gao Jinyun's mecha. Gao Jinyun saw his mecha's energy block exhaust half of its power to resist this attack and found himself both shocked and distressed.

It looked like the power of the advanced mecha's beam gun was significantly higher than theirs as intermediate mecha. If an intermediate mecha's beam gun struck another intermediate mecha's beam shield, it would at most take off 20% power from the energy block of the shielding mecha... there was no way so much power would be drained by just one shot like this. Gao Jinyun knew that if he was hit once more, his mecha's power would bottom out. If that happened, he would only be able to helplessly await death.

Gao Jinyun had yet to get over his fright when the enemy attacked once more. However, this time, because the companions by his side had already dodged clear, Gao Jinyun no longer needed to just take the enemy's attack by force as before to protect them. Although Gao Jinyun was only an intermediate mecha warrior, his control skills were still very solid and the best in his team. He operated his mecha to execute a figure-8 dodge, and the beam shot by just like that...

However, this was just an attack the opponent was using to fool Gao Jinyun — just as Gao Jinyun evaded the beam, he heard his team members cry out in horror in the team comms, "Leader, watch out!"

Some of the team members with faster reflexes were pulling on the triggers of their beam guns rapidly, shooting desperately at the skies above him, as if attempting to prevent something...

Gao Jinyun felt a sense of alarm. Right then, he could finally feel the threat coming down on him from above his head. He rapidly turned his mecha's vision to look up and saw that the enemy who had vanished earlier was now right above his head, swinging a gleaming cold weapon down on him mercilessly.

If he had not moved from his current position, it would not have been impossible to avoid this attack, but his mecha was already in motion from trying to evade that second beam attack. Due to the problem of inertia forcing the completion of the motion, Gao Jinyun was unable to instantly stop his mecha to make an emergency change in direction and execute a new evasion manoeuvre. In other words, the present Gao Jinyun could only helplessly watch his mecha get cut down by the enemy.

Right at this critical moment, Gao Jinyun clenched his teeth and resolutely turned the defensive value of his beam shield up to its maximum. Even though beam shields had terrible defence against cold weapons, at this moment, Gao Jinyun could only gamble on this.

The cold weapon was about to strike Gao Jinyun's mecha when a loud 'clang' rang out. Gao Jinyun reflexively closed his eyes, waiting for the intense pain of severe injury to register with his body, but he soon found that he was feeling nothing at all.

With lightning speed, Gao Jinyun opened his eyes, only to see that the advanced mecha bearing down on him earlier was now already 10 or so metres away from him. Right then, the opponent had his head lifted slightly and was looking up at the air to the right of Gao Jinyun. The cold weapon in his hands that had almost slashed Gao Jinyun had been broken into two pieces. The break in the weapon was flat and even, as if having been sliced clean through by some overpoweringly sharp weapon ¹.

In the next second, Gao Jinyun found the answer. Twenty metres or so on his left side, a giant steel sword about ten metres tall and one metre wide was planted diagonally into the ground. It looked like the opponent's cold weapon had been sliced in half by the flying interception of this big sword. Seeing this, what else was there for Gao Jinyun to learn? He was sure that he had been saved by the owner of the giant steel sword...

Not too far away from the giant steel sword, Gao Jinyun also saw his three team members reacting just like the enemy mecha, staring dumbly at the sky above him to his right...

Realisation settled in and Gao Jinyun quickly turned his view to that spot in the air to his right and saw a mecha hovering there. At a glance, Gao Jinyun could recognise that this was definitely a Federation ace mecha. As a mecha operator whose ambition was to become an ace mecha master, Gao Jinyun was naturally familiar with all the various types of ace mecha available within the Federation. And how could he not recognise this <King of Close Combat> he was so obsessed over?

In his joy and surprise, Gao Jinyun could not help but be a little puzzled as well. As part of the ace mecha troops, the strongest force on planet Newline, why weren't they protecting the students at the most critical area at the dormitory district? Why would this ace mecha be here at such a non-central fighting area?

"Ace operator! From the military? No, there is no military marking on your mecha, only

the emblem of Huaxia's First Academy. If I'm not mistaken, you should be a cadet..." That enemy advanced mecha operator suddenly turned on its voice speakers and began speaking to the ace mecha in the air. His Chinese sounded extremely awkward to the ear, his tone strange and stiff — it was clear to see that he was not a Huaxian.

The ace mecha in the air did not say anything to enlighten the enemy mecha; he only stared stonily at the other.

The enemy mecha did not care that the ace operator had not replied. He was only excited at his unexpected great luck in locating the mission target so quickly. If he could eliminate the other, when he returned, he would become a national hero.

Perhaps emboldened by the honour and glory within his grasp, the enemy mecha became very talkative. He continued to say, "As far as we know, in your Huaxia First Men's Military Academy, the only one who has advanced to ace mecha status recently is someone called Qiao Ting, alias Thunder King. He's another aberrant prodigy after Ling Xiao and could be said to hold the hopes of the masses... this person should be you!" At this point in his speech, the enemy mecha clicked his tongue regretfully, "Tsk, tsk, tsk, what a shame. There cannot be the emergence of another Ling Xiao in Huaxia."

Gao Jinyun's gaze flickered — was the ace operator who saved him truly the Thunder King? If so, he would truly be put in a tough spot. Gao Jinyun knew very well that when he had made the decision to follow Boss Lan, he would eventually go up against the Thunder King one day.

"Are you finished?" The ace mecha in the air finally spoke. His icy voice was so cold that it almost seemed like it could freeze everything in its surroundings.

When Gao Jinyun heard this voice, his irises contracted and his face was filled with disbelief... but soon, his expression turned ecstatic, and his mouth involuntarily split open in a very wide grin. By the time Gao Jinyun managed to rein in his emotions to look up once more at the ace mecha in the sky, his eyes were filled with worship, respect, and admiration, along with joy and happiness that just could not be concealed.

"If I say that I'm finished, what are you going to do?" The enemy mecha's tone was mocking. An ace operator who had advanced within a military academy, who had never seen real battle nor shed any blood, was, in his eyes, just like a newborn chick, nothing to be afraid of. He believed that, with his decade of battle experience, finishing

off such a rookie would be a breeze.

Moreover, while they had been speaking earlier, he had already sent news to his team that the Thunder King Qiao Ting had been sighted here. Thus, his team members should be rushing here soon as well. It turned out that his talkativeness had just been a cover for him to find a chance to send his teammates a message. At the same time, it also worked to buy time so that his teammates could hurry over.

Chapter 366

An Awesome Boss!

"Since you're finished, then let me send you to the afterlife ¹." As the ace operator said this in an icy tone, his mecha suddenly moved, his left hand drawing the beam saber from its back as he leapt towards the enemy mecha, blade slashing.

The enemy mecha quickly operated his mecha to take several steps back, dodging the saber. Attacking from a higher vantage point, thus adding the force of gravity to its own strength, the ace mecha's power right then was not something an ordinary advanced mecha could withstand. Even though the enemy mecha had some contempt for his opponent, he still did not dare to be too careless. An ace mecha was an ace mecha after all — the superiority of its mecha level was still something he needed to take into consideration.

However, the subsequent scene almost caused the enemy mecha to explode from anger. The other had charged down so rapidly from the sky, appearing as if about to attack, but the intended target had not been him at all. Instead, the other had been aiming for that giant steel sword planted in the ground behind him. The ace mecha swooped down fast and low when it was about 3 metres from the ground, and then it was back in the sky in an instant. At this time, that giant sword had been added to the ace mecha's right hand.

The ace mecha's right hand gently tilted the giant sword around, checking it, and seeming extremely pleased, he slung the beam saber in his left hand back onto his back and said, "Against you, just this weapon is enough." These words almost made the advanced mecha operator blow his top. To rely on this type of strength-based cold weapon as his weapon, it basically meant that, in the other's eyes, he was not at all worthy of being called an opponent. It was implied that he was just cannon fodder that could be simply kicked around. On the battlefield, strength-based giant weapons were convenient weapons that could help mecha save power and at the same time be used to clear rabble soldiers swiftly and efficiently.

"You — you're seeking death!" The advanced mecha only had time to say this much before he was interrupted by the other's high-speed attack.

Perhaps because the ace mecha's attack speed was too fast, or perhaps the advanced mecha was so angry that his reflexes were slowed — whichever the case, by the time the advanced mecha could react, the ace mecha's giant sword was already right before his face.

Without any time to evade, he had no choice but to raise both hands and forcibly push them out towards the incoming blade. Following this push, the advanced mecha was sent stumbling a step back...

"Screeech..." Where the two clashed, dazzling sparks were unleashed, almost blinding the spectating Gao Jinyun and his team. By the time their vision recovered, the two fighters had already swept by each other. The ace mecha was currently gripping the giant sword with both hands in a reverse grip, the tip of its sword seemingly pointed steadily at the advanced mecha's back.

Meanwhile, the advanced mecha appeared unusually battered — its beam shield which had initially been glowing with a pearly white sheen was now dull and dim. Both the mecha's arms had been chopped off, revealing stumps at its elbows. The exposed circuitry was still crackling with sparks, proving that this amputation had just occurred.

"How can this... be possible?!" The advanced mecha warrior forced these words out, tone laced with agony and disbelief. Even for an experienced ace mecha, to finish him off should take up a little more time than this...

"You talk too much..." The ace mecha's tone was as cold and indifferent as ever. With this comment, the ace mecha suddenly pulled back the giant sword whose point had been resting on the advanced mecha's back.

While the ace mecha had stayed in position, Gao Jinyun and company had not been able to see clearly what was going on. But once the ace mecha pulled back its sword, everyone understood why the advanced mecha had reacted the way he did.

After the giant sword was drawn back, the advanced mecha which had seemed to only have had its arms chopped off suddenly had two strong jets of blood spurt out from both the front and back of its cockpit. Only now could Gao Jinyun and the others clearly see that the giant sword had not just been held at the advanced mecha's back as they had thought but had already pierced through the advanced mecha warrior's cockpit. Just looking at the width of that giant sword, they knew that the advanced mecha

warrior inside the cockpit must have already been cut into two by the giant sword. There was definitely no chance of survival.

"...Luck is... too bad..." The advanced mecha warrior used up the last of his life to squeeze out these final four words.

His luck was indeed too bad, because the one he had bumped into was not that Thunder King Qiao Ting who did not have any true battle experience. Instead, his opponent was Ling Lan, who had been whipped and tormented into shape by the learning space for a whole sixteen years, who had grown up tested by countless experiences of dire life-or-death situations.

Seeing the ace mecha efficiently finish off that advanced mecha, a complicated expression passed over Gao Jinyun's face. However, he was soon overtaken by happiness, but just as he was about to say something, the ace mecha addressed him first.

"Gao Jinyun, your team is not suited for independent action. Quickly bring your team about two kilometres ahead to the right. Coordinates xx, yy ². We have other teams there. Go join them and then move together."

At these words, Gao Jinyun's expression turned serious and he replied, "Yes, Regiment Commander!"

"Also, after meeting up with that team there, leave this area quickly, the further the better. Don't come back for any reason." The initially calm tone of the ace mecha suddenly became stern, his tone carrying steel that could not be disobeyed.

Gao Jinyun was taken aback by these words and did not agree immediately. Instead, he asked seriously, "Why, Regiment Commander?"

"The enemy is about to come here soon. That enemy mecha earlier has most likely sent out news to his comrades that the Thunder King Qiao Ting is here." The ace mecha told Gao Jinyun about his speculations.

Gao Jinyun was also an intelligent person. The moment he heard this, he immediately understood what the ace mecha was planning to do. His expression changed drastically and he said, "Regiment Commander, for you to remain here and deal with them alone is much too dangerous!" Fighting here all by himself against so many enemies drawn here by the news was truly too reckless — for the sake of the New

Cadet Regiment, he needed to stop the regiment commander.

"This is some rare practical battle experience, how can I miss it? Besides, as long as there are none of our people around, I won't have any worries holding me back. Even if I can't beat the enemy, with this mecha, running away will be an easy matter. You don't have to worry," answered the ace mecha.

Gao Jinyun's bellyful of protests was instantly left stoppered at his throat. He found that the other was speaking the truth — without them holding him back, it would be a piece of cake for his amazing regiment commander to escape from the attacks of a bunch of advanced mecha by relying on this ace mecha. Right then, Gao Jinyun had not considered the possibility that the enemies who would come might be ace mecha instead. If that was the case, even if his regiment commander was controlling an ace mecha, escape would be very difficult.

Gao Jinyun, who did not have much battle experience, did not think of this possibility at all. He felt that what his regiment commander had said made sense, and so agreed and quickly led his team members away from the area, heading swiftly towards the destination his regiment commander had given.

While Gao Jinyun had been speaking with the ace mecha, Gao Jinyun's team members were actually left utterly confused by the conversation. They all thought that the ace mecha was the regiment commander of the Leiting Mecha Clan, Thunder King Qiao Ting, and so found it rather strange that their team leader was calling the other regiment commander. Still, the Thunder King *was* the regiment commander of the Leiting Mecha Clan, so it was not actually wrong to address him as such... they just wondered when their team leader had built such a relationship with the Thunder King, actually getting the Thunder King to step up and save them, who even went so far as asking them to join up and cooperate with a team under him...

Could it be that their boss had secretly betrayed Boss Lan to follow the Thunder King instead? More than one team member thought of this possibility, and even as they were overwhelmed with shock, they also felt rather indignant. This was because they still admired Boss Lan greatly. That regiment commander of theirs who was so powerful he could defeat a senior cadet from Leiting, the number one physical skills expert in the academy. They believed that as long as Boss Lan was given enough time to grow, he would definitely become the second Thunder King...

"Third Elder Brother, how did you come to know the Thunder King?" Finally, one of

the youngest team members could not hold back any longer, asking the question on all their minds.

Gao Jinyun was stunned. "Thunder King? I've heard of him but I don't know him."

"Then why are you following his orders to meet up with his people and work together?" That team member felt even more dissatisfied at this response. Was he still planning to deny it even now? Did their Third Elder Brother actually consider them as his brothers or not?!

"Follow his orders?" As Gao Jinyun was still worrying about whether Boss Lan would remain safe in the ensuing battle, he was not fully paying attention, so his responses and reaction to his team members' questions were obviously a little offbeat and slow. Only when he heard this question did he finally sense something wrong about the scenario — it seemed like his team members had misunderstood.

Concentrating, he immediately understood the root of the misunderstanding. Gao Jinyun instantly smiled wryly and said, "You all think that that ace operator just now was the Thunder King Qiao Ting?"

"Wasn't it? The only one who has advanced to ace operator in the academy, who else could it be but the Thunder King?" asked another team member, confused.

"Yeah, didn't that enemy advanced mecha also say that he was the Thunder King?" someone else brought up more evidence.

Gao Jinyun heard what his team members had to say and sighed, saying, "Yes, everyone thinks that in the First Academy, only the Thunder King has advanced to ace. So no one would imagine that some people are born aberrant, as existences that you can never comprehend... I can only say that we are very lucky to have followed the right boss. The New Cadet Regiment will definitely become one of the strongest factions in the military academy."

Gao Jinyun's words caused some of the team members to be completely bewildered, unsure what their team leader was trying to say. Those who were more quick-witted, however, immediately realised the meaning behind Gao Jinyun's words. One of the ones who had figured things out blurted out in shock, "Third Elder Brother, are you saying that that ace operator... is our regiment commander Boss Lan?"

This question rendered all the team members speechless. The team which had been

moving along quickly yet in an orderly manner suddenly began to display some signs of disarray as some team members forgot about the controls in their hands. Two or three of the mecha bumped into each other, almost causing some of them to fall over.

However, though Gao Jinyun's team only consisted of intermediate mecha, the team members' control skills were still very solid. It did not take the team long to restore order and pick up their speed again as they continued to move closer to the coordinates they had been given.

After marching in silence for ten seconds or so, a team member finally began howling with pride and excitement in the team comms channel. "AAAAAAAHH, our regiment commander is actually an ace operator too! He's only a first year! A first year! Aaaaaaaaah...!" The loudness of his voice almost broke the eardrums of the other members, yet no one said anything to rebuke him, because what he was saying was exactly what they wanted to say too!

Hells, their regiment commander was just too awesome! It's just like their team leader had said — they had followed the right boss!

Chapter 367

Making Mischief!

It should be said that Gao Jinyun's team was truly very fortunate. In their critical moment of danger, Ling Lan had arrived in the nick of time.

Speaking of which, how had Ling Lan known to come here? When Ling Lan had completed her preparations in the hidden room, she had entered the launch port tunnel, and then, using the ejection force of the launch port, she had activated her engines to fly out of the storehouse into the air outside.

That moment was also coincidentally when Qi Long and the others of her team were leading the 100 odd mecha operators of the New Cadet Regiment out of the mecha storehouse. Ling Lan looked out at the entire military academy from her bird's eye vantage point and, using Little Four's ability, she opened up multiple channels showing different viewing angles in an attempt to get a comprehensive grasp of the entire battlefield.

Before determining for sure whether the people of the New Cadet Regiment could handle this battlefield, Ling Lan was not going to participate in the fighting directly. Her first responsibility in this battlefield was to ensure the survival of as many members as possible. Ling Lan was well aware that the mortality rate was most often the highest at the start of a battle. Once a fighter had adapted to the battlefield, they would not die so easily.

Ling Lan knew that if she wanted her party members to grow up and increase their strength, they would need to rely on their own strength to fight. Thus, Ling Lan would not act like an old mother hen and watch over her faction members till the end. Once they had safely gotten through this most dangerous period of adjustment, Ling Lan would let go completely and let her faction members fight to secure their own survival.

The existence of two Ling Lans, from her life experience of two worlds, had caused Ling Lan's personality to become very complicated and filled with contradictions. She had the gentle compassion and considerate heart of her previous world within her, but she also possessed the cold-blooded ruthlessness and resolve forced upon her by the learning space of this world... she could not bear for the innocent companions by

her side to be sacrificed pointlessly, but she was also ruthless enough to leave her companions in a desperate situation so they would have an opportunity to break past their limits and find their own path to survival.

At this time, the fighting was already in full swing in the entire campus area on planet Newline. The battlefield which had initially started more than 10 kilometres away from the school had now spread all the way inside the military academy. The flames of war had been kindled at every corner of the military academy, with the dormitory district being the area which saw the most fighting. Almost half of the ground forces were tied up there, with an equally large number of enemy mecha attacking, almost more than half of the total invading mecha force.

Seeing this, Ling Lan's brow furrowed slightly. This situation proved that the objective of these mysterious enemies was indeed like she had deduced — they were aiming for them cadets. The only thing she could not be sure of was whether this sudden and unexpected attack was specifically targeting her team.

A cold gleam appeared in Ling Lan's eyes. If her team had truly been exposed, then she would have no choice but to let her dad step in. The 23rd Division would be the best protective umbrella for her team. Ling Lan believed that Ling Xiao would definitely be able to protect them till they grew up enough. At that time, they would no longer be helpless targets for the enemies to slaughter as they liked. If any enemies wanted to deal with them then, they would have to stop and consider whether they could afford to pay the price.

Ling Lan had just thought of a response plan if things really ended up developing into a worst case scenario when, before she could breathe out, her attention was drawn by one of the panels on her mecha's screen. It was the team led by Gao Jinyun — they were in danger.

As expected, it was not that easy for a team made up of only intermediate mecha to survive the battlefield. If they had had an advanced mecha to lead them, then this kind of situation where they were rendered helpless would never have happened... Ling Lan decisively pushed all of her thrusters to send her mecha flying like a streak of light towards Gao Jinyun's team.

Although the mecha Ling Lan was currently piloting was not the fastest among all of the ace mecha, its speed was not just one or two times faster than an advanced mecha's but was in fact up to five or six times faster. Of course, Ling Lan could also

push the speed to the maximum because her body was currently extremely tough, completely able to withstand the feedback force brought on by the movement of the mecha. If this had been her body from three years ago, things would probably not have been as easy.

And the results were just as we all were witness to — at that most critical moment, Ling Lan managed to rescue Gao Jinyun in the nick of time, and then finished off the enemy advanced mecha in one move.

After sending Gao Jinyun and company off, Ling Lan switched her mecha's battle mode from close-range combat mode to night-cloak assassination mode. This was directly reflected in the mecha's appearance — the energy beam shield of the mecha which had initially been glowing softly instantly turned dark as pitch. The entire mecha no longer emitted any bit of light, merging as one with the darkness of the night...

The ace mecha which had been hovering in the air all this while vanished just like that. Ling Lan was not at all arrogant. Not knowing what level of enemies would be coming here, she would not stand here blatantly and be a convenient target for the enemies to attack.

A minute later, in the distant night sky, framed by the flames of war, the indistinct silhouettes of five mecha appeared.

"This should be the place. The coordinates M03 gave us is right around here." The five mecha seemed to be unrelated, but they were in fact communicating with one another in their team commlink.

"Three minutes ago, M03 fell out of contact. I'm afraid something has happened to him. Everyone, be careful."

"Yes, M01," responded the other mecha in unison. M01 was likely to be the leader of this team.

Very soon, they discovered mecha M03 on the ground. They immediately flew over and landed. Three of the mecha stood guard as one of the remaining two mecha rushed over to M03's side and squatted down beside the prostrate mecha to check on its condition. Meanwhile, the last mecha looked as if he were just standing around, at ease with his hands hanging loosely by his sides, not at all on guard, but an experienced mecha operator would be able to tell that the mecha's current stance was actually the

best stance for counterattacking. This was because two extremely short long-range power beam guns ¹ were strapped to the outsides of the mecha's thighs.

Mecha equipped with this kind of weapon suspension system were known as sharpshooters. Just when you believed that the other had no weapons in their hands and let down your guard, the other could give you a fatal shot. Within 0.01 seconds, the other could draw the long-range beam guns from their thighs and strike your mecha's vital points. This type of mecha had one other name, and that was ambusher!

"M01, M03's mecha has been pierced through the cockpit by someone with one blow. M03 died instantly from the resulting injury... based off the extent of damage on the mecha, they might have fought for quite a while before it happened. Otherwise, the arms of M03's mecha would not have been chopped off. Preliminary speculation is that after M03 had his arms chopped off, he was then stabbed through the cockpit without being able to put up any resistance." The mecha examining M03's mecha quickly reported his analysis to M01.

"M05, do you know what weapon the opponent used?" The one operating the sharpshooter was the team's leader, M01. After listening to M05's report, he immediately followed up with this question.

"Based on the marks left on the cockpit, it's an overbearing cold weapon. It gives off a very similar feel to the giant sword of the <King of Close Combat> among the ace mecha." M05 carefully examined the breaks at the front and back of the cockpit — those huge diamond-shaped holes inevitably brought to mind that giant and domineering weapon.

"Didn't the intelligence report say that the mecha the Thunder King was proficient at was the long-range <King of Star Space ²>?" M01 could not help but frown when he heard M05's report. Although the two were both ace mecha, the control style of these two mecha belonged to completely opposite ends of a spectrum, with there being a great distance between the two mecha's techniques. Typically, mecha operators who were proficient on one front were very unlikely to be able to operate mecha with a completely different and opposing style. The long-range <King of Star Space> and the close-range <King of Close Combat> fell precisely into this scenario of diametrically opposed control styles.

"Could it be that there is another ace mecha operator?" M01's question caused M05 to jolt, and this question slipped out from his lips.

"We do not know what exactly happened here three minutes ago, so anything is possible," replied M01 calmly. At the same time, he turned his radar scanner on to its maximum setting. Regardless of whether it was the long-range <King of Star Space> or the close-range <King of Close Combat>, if they were ambushed by the opponent, things would not go well for their team.

Compared to M03's arrogance, M01 was obviously much more cool-headed and self-aware. Facing an unseen enemy, he brought all of his focus to the fore, fearing an ambush by the opponent.

Suddenly, his radar picked something up. He instantly drew the two guns by his thighs to shoot frenziedly at a particular corner. Meanwhile, the three mecha standing watch at the edges of the scene reacted swiftly as well. They followed M01's lead to aim at that spot and began to shoot their beam guns just as wildly.

After a round of attacks, the grass in that area had been completely destroyed by the powerful beam energy to turn into a pile of ashes. Within the ashes, the hilt of a burnt beam saber ³ could be seen. It turned out that the energy reaction on the radar previously had actually been emitted by the beam saber.

"That beam saber is M03's." M05's vision was sharp. Although the beam saber's hilt had already been struck so much that it had been deformed, its original form almost indiscernible, M05 had still noticed the remains of the owner's label on it.

"That's strange. Why would the beam saber suddenly give off an energy reaction? Could it be that someone activated it just now?" asked M01 with a frown. A beam saber needed a person to activate it — it should be said that a beam saber hilt lying on the ground would never give off any energy waves without it being used by someone. But then, if someone had activated it, M01 did not believe that there was anyone fast enough to dodge his sharpshooting and escape his attack range in that brief instant.

M05 also could not figure out this issue that had stumped M01. He could not help but shudder and ask timidly, "Could it be a ghost?"

"How could that be possible?!" barked M01 angrily in return. Several millenniums of scientific research had proven that ghosts were merely figments of the Huaxians' imagination — they did not exist.

M05 too felt that he was being ridiculous, and so he did not dare to say anything more.

Perhaps the beam saber's switch had been defective and had let some energy leak out.

Right at this time, M01 sensed the radar responding again, highlighting the spot right behind M05. M01 shouted, "M05, move!"

M05's reaction was swift — he immediately threw himself to one side — and M01 timed things masterfully. M05 had barely moved aside to reveal an opening when the beam gun in M01's hand let loose a deluge of shots. This time, the three other team members behind M01 did not manage to keep up. Only after M05 had dodged aside completely did they follow up with their own attacks, shooting at the same area M01 was shooting at.

Very soon, this round of attacks ended. This time, there was a beam gun lying there in the aftermath, a blackened lump already completely deformed from the barrage of attacks. M01's expression shifted at the sight, because he realised that this beam gun was also a weapon of M03's... could it be that M03 could not rest in peace and so was trying to give them some hint? Or perhaps someone was using M03's things to cause mischief?

"Bastard, don't try to use these kinds of tricks to scare us! Bloody come out and face us if you have any godd*mn balls!" M01 suddenly switched comms channels to connect to his external speakers and shouted.

Chapter 368

Power Gap!

However, all that answered M01 was silence. Although M01 did not believe in ghosts, this situation before him now which could not be explained by logical reasoning and common sense was making him feel rather unsettled and creeped out.

"Ah..." A horrified cry suddenly rang out in the team's commlink. M01's heart clenched and he whipped his head around. However, all he saw was one of the three guarding members pointing at M05 lying on the ground... even without seeing the other member's facial expression, M01 could feel the fright and panic of the other.

M01 felt that something was not right, because M05 still had not gotten up from the ground after this much time. This was definitely not normal. He stepped forward and squatted down, flipping M05's mecha around. Only then did he discover that the seemingly perfectly intact mecha had actually had its cockpit pierced by a short and sturdy high-frequency blade right through a vital point on the mecha's front.

Meanwhile, a pool of blood had begun to spread out on the ground the mecha had been lying on. That team member who had screamed must have seen the spreading pool of blood...

"Bastard, come out!" At this point, what else was there for M01 to figure out? He abruptly stood up and began shouting out at the still silence around them. There was definitely no such thing as ghosts — all of this was just a deliberate ploy of the enemy. Using those things to draw their attention, the enemy had then taken advantage of their distraction to kill the unprepared M05. And all of this had happened right under their noses.

It had to be said that the enemy's ploy was extremely clever. Even now, M01 still could not figure out what method the enemy had used to set it so that the beam saber and beam gun would release some energy response at those specific moments. M01 knew well that it was impossible for someone to activate the power switches at those two locations without being seen, yet at the same time, there was no other setup to show any hidden manipulations. This kind of arrangement that could not be unravelled by common logic had successfully captured their attention, causing them to neglect the

unprepared M05. This had given the enemy the opportunity to kill M05 without any sign.

Undoubtedly, their enemy was an experienced assassin. M01 was instantly suspicious, wondering whether this person was not that Thunder King Qiao Ting like M03 had reported. Qiao Ting's talent and potential may be extremely aberrant — otherwise he would not have been able to advance to ace operator — but this kind of rich combat experience was not something a cadet could have.

"We've been duped! Looks like the opponent used the Thunder King as bait to draw us here to kill us one by one," said M01 through gritted teeth. However, he then instantly backtracked and denied his own words, "No, they do not know our target is the Thunder King Qiao Ting, so they could not have made this sort of arrangement. Unless our plans have been leaked... also, if this was really a trap, they could not have just arranged for one person to lie here in ambush."

Although M01 had been thrown off a little by the situation before his eyes, he still managed to retain enough of his composure to think things through. He was able to tell that there should only be one enemy hiding here in ambush, but this enemy was very strong and very dangerous.

"This should be a coincidence..." Suddenly, M01 thought of Thunder King Qiao Ting's mentor, Tang Yu, that prodigious talent who was known as the 'Versatile Ace Master'. Could it be him?

At this thought, M01 could not help but shudder. An experienced ace mecha master like Tang Yu was completely incomparable with a newbie like Qiao Ting — for them alone to go up against an experienced ace mecha master like that was an absolutely suicidal endeavour. He knew he could not afford to hesitate any longer. He immediately transmitted the news that Tang Yu could be here to central command, hoping to receive backup as soon as possible.

"Boss, I've obtained their signal source..." Ling Lan, who had been hiding in the shadows, still and quiet like a ferocious beast on the hunt, preparing to deal death with one blow, stared coldly at the roaring M01 not too far from her. When she registered the excited yells of Little Four in her mindspace, she could not help but clench her fists. She knew that the wait was over — it was now time to kill her prey.

It turned out that all of this was part of Ling Lan's and Little Four's meticulous plan to

obtain the enemy's signal source. Little Four and Ling Lan did not believe the enemy was like them, completely unable to contact the outside world. Sure enough, all of this had pushed M01 in his panic to directly make contact with the enemy's central command on a starship in space, letting Little Four obtain the other side's signal source.

Having obtained the signal source, Little Four was no longer contained on the ground. He had been completely unleashed to become a free-flying king of virtual signals ¹.

After M01 had successfully sent out his message, he had just relaxed a little when he saw a familiar thermal reaction appear once more at one point on his radar. M01's hand paused, a tendril of doubt coursing through his mind — could it be that the enemy was trying to trick him again and assassinate another one of his team members when he turned to deal with the source of the thermal reaction?

Doubt rose in M01's heart, causing his movements to slow, so he did not attack the thermal reaction point as swiftly as he had the previous two times. Right at that moment, from the spot where the heat had been picked up, which was on the left side of the dense forest behind them, a mecha shot out, coming to the area behind M01 in the blink of an eye... yes, the enemy's target was not M01 but the three members guarding three different directions at his back.

Without M01's guidance, the three members were not at all on guard against that particular spot. When they noticed the mecha leaping at them ferociously, their only response was to pull the triggers of their beam guns desperately, trying to use overwhelming firepower to force the opponent back...

But, all of this was in vain — the mecha's figure shimmered, and the entire mecha drew a streak of shadow through the air. Their seemingly dense and concentrated firepower merely struck virtual impressions the opponent left behind. Between blinks, that enemy mecha was already before them.

"Bang bang bang!" Three loud collisions caused M01's heart to jerk. This was followed by three terrible screams in M01's team commlink. These three almost simultaneous screams caused M01's gun hand which was aimed at the opponent, about to shoot, to tremble...

He who had never missed before, perhaps due to this tremble, actually shot wide... after that mecha achieved his objective with one strike, he suddenly leapt backwards,

retreating back into that dense forest, disappearing completely from M01's radar once more...

M01 looked out at the surroundings before him — there was nothing but the sound of the wind and the distant sounds of cannonfire. There was no other sound in this patch of dense forest... his entire body felt cold, a chill penetrating deep into his heart. Here at this place, with M03 as the first to go down, four more of his team members were now lying on the ground... Of the initially rather complete 6-man team, he was now the only one left.

He involuntarily turned his gaze to those three team members of his who had just lost their lives, and his irises contracted. Those three team members had truly died in such a pitiful way. They had had no so-called chance at all of fighting back before they had been crushed alive by the opponent's sheer brute strength. The cockpits of those three mecha were now deeply caved in — M01 did not have to look closer to know that the men inside were now probably ground meat by now. Even if the damage was not to that extent, there was still absolutely no chance of survival.

The way they died proved the enemy had killed them without having to use any advanced combat techniques. By relying only on his mecha's inherent superiority and his horrifying giant sword, he had easily killed those three team members. By this time, M01 had confirmed that that mecha was indeed an ace mecha. Although it was not one with the military's powerful configurations, being merely a trainee mecha of the academy, due to the sheer prowess of its operator, this mecha with its basic configuration had still displayed formidable combat power — the <King of Close Combat> was truly strong and terrifying, striking fear into his heart.

The gap between their strength and that of this ace mecha master was really too wide. A surge of bitterness rose in M01's heart. He knew well that if the enemy wanted to kill him, just another two forceful attacks would be enough to finish him off. The moment the enemy managed to get close, he was sure to have no hope of survival.

M01 stared at the unresponsive radar and a futile hope actually fluttered in his heart. He hoped that the ace operator had already left... for the first time, this kind of cowardly notion entered his mind on the battlefield. Before this, no matter how perilous the situation, he had never ever feared for his life like this. M01 knew that he had already lost. Facing that ace operator once more, he most probably did not even have the courage to stake his life in battle anymore. Even now, he had the urge to run away — it was only the pride of a warrior which kept him in place to await his final

outcome.

"Have you cracked the other's signal?" Once again concealed, Ling Lan calmly observed her prey who had lost his calm as she questioned Little Four within the mindspace.

"Already cracked!" Little Four raised both his arms to express his excitement. "He actually thought that, Boss, you are the ace mecha instructor Tang Yu... believing that Qiao Ting is somewhere here as well, he has already requested reinforcements from their central command."

Hearing the name Tang Yu, an image of the referee instructor who had been vaguely biased towards her side on that arena stage emerged uncalled in Ling Lan's mind's eye. He had not favoured the Leiting Mecha Clan just because he was Thunder King Qiao Ting's instructor. It should be said that the New Cadet Regiment's triumph in that battle was in large part also due to his consideration for them.

"Does this mean that the other side will also be sending masters here as well?" Ling Lan's expression turned grim. She naturally wanted to fight against skilled masters, but if a group of masters came, she would not be able to continue with her original plan of waiting here for rabbits to fall into her snare ².

"It must be, but I've already obtained the signal source of their communications. I'll keep an eye on them and will definitely figure out how many people the other side has sent here," responded Little Four confidently. He would not let his boss fall into danger!

"That's good. Since everything is settled, it's about time for me to finish off this fellow." Little Four's reply caused Ling Lan to relax. Since she had already received the answer she wanted, then there was no longer any need to keep this enemy before her alive... Ling Lan decisively brought out her giant sword and pointed it straight at the enemy who was still trying to locate her.

M01 stared at his radar with mixed feelings, unsure whether he wanted there to be a response on the radar. Right at this moment, several energy responses appeared on the radar at the same time. These few points were all close to him, and there were even three points that were right by his side. This sudden situation made him raise both his guns in a flailing panic. Aiming for those few spots, he began shooting with both hands, madly sending a flood of beam energy pouring out from the guns in his

hands...

Chapter 369

Team-M's Annihilation!

The beam shots hit the ground surfaces of those areas which had registered a response on the radar, sending clumps of dirt and clouds of dust into the air. It had to be said that M01's reaction speed was extremely fast — even though he had lost his calm, his solid foundational skills still let him strike out at those energy response spots in the blink of an eye...

After one round of attacks, there was still no sign of the ace mecha. Before M01 could let out a sigh of relief, a strong gust of wind came up from behind him. His heart skipped a beat, and before he could operate his mecha to dodge, he felt his back being struck by a heavy force and he could not help but spurt out a mouthful of blood.

M01 clenched his teeth against the pain. He urgently controlled the mecha to roll forwards with the momentum of the blow, and at the same time, he drew out a tube of medicinal agent from a slot inside the cockpit. Flicking the cap of the tube open with his right thumb, he poured the agent down his throat.

Even if he had not seen any sign of the opponent, this tremendous force alone let him know that the one who attacked him was most certainly that unseen ace mecha. As expected, the other was not planning to let him go.

M01 knew that he most likely would not be able to leave planet Newline alive as that last strike had dealt severe damage to his internal organs; unless he immediately escaped from here to find an army doctor, then maybe he would still have some hope of survival. However, M01 knew that the powerful ace mecha would never let him escape. Since death was certain, M01's initial fear was swept away as he prepared himself for one last desperate gamble.

This was why he had used the powerful painkiller formulated by the military. This would guarantee that he would not be paralysed by pain, allowing him to execute the following controls before his life was exhausted. This analgesic agent was a type of medical agent their country had concocted to bring out one's life energy in one final burst. It was meant to let warriors with no chance of survival to go out in a blaze of glory, burning up the last of their life to kill off more enemies... every warrior who was

sent out to battle would have a tube of this agent with them.

"If you want to kill me, you'll need to pay the proper price!" roared M01 in his cockpit. He flipped his mecha around and rose to a half-kneel, then raising both his hands, he aimed for the ace mecha... eyes red, M01 pulled the triggers of both his laser beam handguns. The speed at which he pulled the triggers was three times faster than usual — it looked like under the lash of both the medical agent and his despair, his latent potential had all been unleashed.

M01 naturally did not dare dream that these attacks would destroy the enemy mecha. An ace mecha was not something their energy weapons could destroy. He only wished to leave some damage on the enemy mecha before he died. That way, it would help the comrades from their reinforcements take down this despicable enemy... yes, M01 had pinned his hopes on his comrades. Thus, he wanted to help his comrades relieve as much pressure as possible before he died.

But how could things turn out as M01 wished? That ace mecha's response instantly crushed M01's barely regained confidence. That ace mecha did not care at all about M01's resistance — facing the two laser beam guns about to fire, the opponent simply swung the great sword in his hands...

The giant sword flew out of the other's hands and hurtled through the air. Just as M01 pulled on the triggers, the sword had already arrived before him to slice at his two arms wielding the laser beam handguns...

There was a loud 'snap' and M01 did not see beams pouring out from the handguns in his mecha's hands as he expected. Instead, he saw two arms suddenly fly into the air — he stared wide-eyed at that pair of arms, which held his two laser beam handguns. They drew a graceful arc through the air before landing heavily onto the ground...

Before he could shake himself from his confused shock, his mecha's screen was abruptly covered by a dark shadow. His vision in the cockpit was entirely blocked off, and soon after, he sensed a tremendous force slamming into his cockpit once more. This time, he was not as lucky as before to retain his awareness despite his injuries; he was instantly struck unconscious by this force, his entire being plunged into darkness...

Even if M01 was still alive after this attack, having lost consciousness meant that he would no longer have the chance to wake up ever again.

Watching the final enemy mecha collapsing heavily to the ground, Ling Lan smoothly pulled up the giant sword planted in the ground beside her. Without any hesitation, she instantly stabbed the sword through the other's cockpit...

The sword slid in, and then Ling Lan could clearly see blood spurt out from the cracks in the cockpit. The glow of the enemy mecha's defensive beam shield gradually disappeared, dimming into darkness, and Ling Lan knew that both the man and machine of this enemy mecha before her eyes was gone.

"Opponent's death verified!" As expected, the A.I. of the ace mecha coldly announced the death of the enemy. Only then did Ling Lan pull out her sword from the cockpit. Reflexively, she lifted her head to look towards the battle-lit night skies. A cold smirk appeared on her lips, and with a flicker, her figure disappeared within the dense forest.

Little Four had just alerted Ling Lan to the approach of three mecha from three kilometres away. The group consisted of one ace mecha and two special-class mecha. This was very likely an ace mecha squadron led by an ace main and two special-class secondaries.

Meanwhile, at this moment, Qiao Ting's group who had moved off ahead of Ling Lan did not linger in the skies above the mecha storehouse to protect their team members as Ling Lan had done. With a clear focus, they moved west, preparing to join the fight in the most battle-intense dormitory district.

Of course, Qiao Ting's group did not choose to enter the frontlines, aiming to land instead at the rear end of the ground forces. This was because they knew that on a merciless battlefield, unidentified mecha would be considered by both sides as part of the enemy forces by default. They were not arrogant enough to believe that they would be able to survive the combined attack of both sides.

Sure enough, Qiao Ting's group had just begun their descent when they received a warning from a mecha column that had temporarily stopped for adjustments. Qiao Ting responded quickly, immediately reporting their status as cadets. As they were indeed piloting trainee mecha of the academy, they were finally allowed to land under the close supervision of the ground mecha team.

Just as Qiao Ting's team was feeling restless and uneasy, Qiao Ting received a video call request. He immediately accepted the call, and a person instantly appeared on his mecha's screen. It was his instructor, Tang Yu.

When Tang Yu saw Qiao Ting, he let out a quiet sigh and said, "Qiao Ting, so it is you. Why have you brought your people here in mecha?"

Qiao Ting primly gave a cadet's salute to Tang Yu and then said respectfully, "Although we're only cadets, we too can fight. So we've come, prepared to raise weapons and protect our academy."

Qiao Ting's reply made Tang Yu's eyes flash with a trace of approval. Able to keep calm in moments of crisis and choosing to go to the mecha storehouse to obtain trainee mecha — this action was undoubtedly correct. Leaving aside whether their combat skills would be at all effective in this cruel battle, their choice at least gave them some means of protecting themselves. Compared to those students trapped in the dormitory district now, reliant on the forces outside to protect them, Qiao Ting's team was perhaps much more likely to survive this battle.

At this thought, Tang Yu looked back at the dormitory district behind him with concern. Although both sides were still stuck in a stalemate at present, their side was already stretched to their limits. Not only had the ground forces been dispatched, even all the instructors of the military academy had stepped up to fight. In other words, they had nothing left in reserve, but they had no idea whether the enemy had any reinforcements left...

Tang Yu could not help but look up at the endless starry sky above. If the enemy still had any fighting strength left in reserve, the outcome of this battle would undoubtedly be their defeat. Perhaps the instructors would still be able to rely on the superiority of their mecha and temporarily escape with their lives, but the students in the dormitory district behind them would definitely be destined to die... seeing how the enemy was throwing their full force at the dormitory district, even the stupidest person could tell that the enemy's objective was precisely the students behind them... would the Federation truly lose several generations worth of capable fighters because of this?

Tang Yu was extremely anxious but he still appeared as calm as usual on the outside. Before things became truly dire, he absolutely would not reveal his anxiety and affect the confidence of these excellent children before him. Thus, he ordered, "Qiao Ting, lead your team members to move alongside us. After this, follow our orders."

Even if they did not manage to protect all the cadets in the end, he still wanted to safeguard these excellent seeds before him now... Tang Yu vowed in his heart. This was

why he had asked Qiao Ting's team to move with them — if things really took a turn for the worse as he imagined, he and the other instructors would do their utmost to protect Qiao Ting and these other excellent talents, giving these excellent seeds a better chance at survival.

"Yes, Sir!" Qiao Ting immediately agreed to Tang Yu's orders. Qiao Ting was well aware that, lacking experience, they were indeed in need of experienced instructors to provide practical guidance. This would make it easier for them to adapt to the cruel realities of battle.

Just like that, Qiao Ting's team followed Tang Yu and the other instructors into battle. The instructors were primarily special-class operators with a small portion being ace operators. Some, like Instructor Tang Yu, were top-class ace operators. On the battlefield, Tang Yu could fight on even ground with two to three regular ace operators — in the past, before the number one ace operator Senior Colonel Qi had advanced to imperial status, he had even been able to handle four to five ace operators simultaneously on his own.

Though they were all ace operators, there was still distinction within the ranks. Of course, this distinction was due to the accumulation of battle experience and had very little relation to control techniques. This was also why ace operators who had gained their advancement inside a military academy like Qiao Ting would be looked down upon by those battle-experienced advanced mecha warriors. Although many of the ace mecha operators who had advanced by this route had very high-level control skills and techniques, due to a lack of true battle experience, there had been numerous cases where battle-experienced advanced mecha warriors had set up traps and successfully turned the tables on these ace operators and killed them.

Thus, levels were actually not that important — the most important thing on the battlefield was whether you could grasp every opportunity available to kill your opponent and survive.

Chapter 370

The Team Members Arrive!

In the meantime, Gao Jinyun had led his team swiftly towards the spot Ling Lan had pointed out to him and met up with another team from the New Cadet Regiment making their final adjustments before battle. The two teams combined, and when the team leader of the other team heard that Ling Lan had instructed them to leave this area quickly, he did not dare to tarry. The two teams swiftly packed up and sprinted off in the opposite direction of where Ling Lan had been.

The two team leaders knew very well that their regiment commander's fight was not something they could get involved with. In order to not create trouble for their regiment commander, it was better for them to stay farther away. Of course, they were also afraid that they might bump into some formidable foe who had gotten slightly lost if they stayed too close to their regiment commander's location. That would be a terrible tragedy.

Just like that, the two teams rushed away, pulling a greater distance away from Ling Lan. Only when they felt a little safer did they slow their steps and prepare to take a breather and gather themselves. Just then, they noticed altogether at the same time that there was an energy reaction marking unidentified mecha on the radar. The two teams immediately shifted into battle mode, prepared to fight tenaciously against this unidentified mecha squad when they found that it was a false alarm.

Apparently, this mecha team that had shown up out of the blue was Qi Long's group. They had just finished fighting with two advanced mecha that had gotten stranded off on their own and were cleaning up when they had abruptly stumbled upon more than ten mecha behind them. They too had received a bit of a fright, thinking that they had been surrounded by the enemy.

When the two sides discovered that it was just others from their own faction, they relaxed. Gao Jinyun saw that Qi Long's team consisted entirely of advanced mecha, and he also saw how they had swiftly and efficiently defeated two enemy advanced mecha. This sparked an idea in his mind. Gao Jinyun thought, though their teams' levels were overall too low to be of any help to Boss Lan, Qi Long's team was a completely different

matter. A team of advanced mecha warriors should be able to help Boss Lan out.

Thus, Gao Jinyun quickly relayed Boss Lan's situation to Qi Long's team, pointing out as well that Boss Lan could be in danger and may have been surrounded by the enemy.

This news shocked Qi Long's team and they unanimously decided to rush over to their boss's location. All the members believed that since they were members of Ling Lan's battle clan, of course they had to brave danger and death alongside their clan leader.

Just like that, Qi Long's team hurriedly bid farewell to the two teams there and began rushing towards Ling Lan's location...



Right at that moment, the ace mecha squad that had charged over after receiving their orders finally arrived at the coordinates team M had reported.

"This should be the spot." Three mecha came to an abrupt stop in the air above the given coordinates. One of the special-class mecha in the group commented as he scanned the still and silent circular area below.

"It looks like team M has been completely wiped out. We've come too late." The other special-class mecha quickly zoomed in on the empty area below. On his mecha's screen, the condition of the ground below was now clearly displayed. There were several dull-coloured mecha down on the ground, as well as cockpits spattered with blood, a sign that these mecha had all met a bad end.

The moment their squad had received their orders from central command, they had immediately altered their route to head here instead of towards the dormitory district. It had only taken them a short two minutes or so, but they were still too late.

"Could it be that the enemy has already run away?" The special-class mecha who had first spoken looked at his unresponsive radar and suggested this possibility.

"No, the enemy should still be nearby," said the thus far silent ace mecha right at the front.

"Sir, how can you tell?" The special-class mecha who was wondering whether the enemy had run away could not help but ask curiously in response to his team leader's

statement.

"Because all the way here, I had opened my mecha's radar scanner to its maximum range. During this time, there has been no sign of any energy leaving the area. So the only remaining possibility is that the opponent is still here," the ace operator analysed calmly. "For the enemy to be bold enough to stay back, he must have something up his sleeve. Be on your guard."

The ace operator's words caused his two secondaries to become wary, and they quickly replied, "Understood, sir!"

"This present situation confirms that the other is skilled in concealment and assassination. He probably intends to separate us and kill us off one by one..." the ace operator added after a brief pause. "That being the case, you two remain in the air and maintain full scene comprehensive monitoring. I'll go down on my own to check things out."

"Yes, sir!" The two secondary mecha operators knew that they had no place to intervene in a battle between battle-experienced ace operators. Therefore, rather than getting in the way down below, they might as well stay up here to monitor the situation — if anything unexpected happened, they would be able to alert their team leader in time.

After arranging all this, the ace operator piloted his mecha to descend slowly onto the circular open space below. As soon as he landed, the ace operator understood why team M had been completely wiped out in such a short duration of time. This terrain was just too suitable for concealed attacks. The surrounding circle of tall and dense forestry allowed mecha to lurk among the trees easily. As long as the enemy turned off their mecha, another mecha's radar would not be able to pick up its energy output. On top of that, team M's combat power was just too weak compared to that of the opponent's. For an enemy familiar with this terrain, capitalising on it to conduct ambushes and finish off team M would be way too easy.

At this observation, the ace operator could not help but sigh under his breath. If he had been team M's leader, he would never have landed straightaway. Instead, he would have hovered in the air and destroyed the dense forest in the surroundings first — no matter what, it was necessary to ruin this disadvantageous terrain.

Having looked over the terrain, the ace operator roughly knew how team M had been

killed, but he still did not jump to any conclusions, carefully checking the conditions of all the mecha remnants of team M. When he saw that all signs of severe damage were on the mecha cockpits, his heart clenched.

It looked like the enemy was an extremely level-headed person and was ruthless in his attacks — almost every mecha he examined had been killed in one hit. Also, the weapon the enemy used was a giant cold weapon. This type of weapon was extremely overbearing — ace operators generally could not use this type of weapon with ease, but this person obviously could. The other's attacks had been extremely precise, clean and efficient — he was certain to be someone who had mastered this type of weapon...

The ace operator began to rifle through his mind, searching through all the information he had on the Huaxian ace operators staying on planet Newline. However, he could not find any ace operator that truly fit these conditions... after turning it over in his mind, only the elite ace Tang Yu known as the 'Versatile Ace Master' could possibly do such a thing. It looked like the intelligence team M had obtained right before they perished had been accurate. Other than Tang Yu, there really was no one else here who could utilise a giant cold weapon with such proficiency.

"Sir, mecha energy detected about 10 kilometres away. Numbers at 1, 2, 3... 7. There are 7 mecha in total." Right then, one of the secondary mecha responsible for wide-range scanning reported loudly in the team commlink.

"Enemy mecha? Allied mecha?" In order to prevent an ambush from the lurking enemy mecha here, the ace operator had narrowed his radar's range to its smallest and most accurate range. Hence, he had not noticed this situation which had popped up 10 kilometres away. At his subordinate's words, his brow furrowed. Could it be that central command had sent another squad here to investigate? This displeased him. Did central command think he alone was no match for Tang Yu? As an ace operator, he had his pride. He did not want other people to interfere when he fought with an opponent of equal strength.

"They're enemy mecha coming from within the military academy." At his leader's question, the secondary knew he had not explained clearly enough. They had not received any news that any of their comrades had gone that deep into the enemy territory in that direction, so for so many mecha to appear all at once from that end, it was very unlikely that they were allied mecha.

"Prepare for battle!" Receiving this answer, the ace mecha commanded with a sneer.

With that many mecha coming over, it was almost certain that it would be a team of small fry. They definitely could not be an ace mecha squad, because ace mecha squads were always set with an ace mecha as primary and two special-class mecha as secondaries. Of course, every army had its own trump card — the strongest ace mecha squad would have ace mecha as both its main and secondaries. Whenever this type of squad was dispatched, it would mean the battle had reached the most critical point, where victory and defeat were about to be determined...

Moreover, from the intelligence reports he had received, there was no such ace mecha squad on planet Newline, whether it was in the ground forces or within the school's ranks. Therefore, for so many mecha to come at once, it was likely that these were all advanced mecha, or perhaps mostly advanced mecha with a few special-class operators among them. This was the situation at best. With regards to this kind of enemy, no matter how many came, he was not at all concerned. On the battlefield, an ace mecha was definitely a top-level existence which could stand a head above the crowd.

"Boss, Qi Long and the rest of the team are coming." Little Four had also picked up the voices of Qi Long and the other team members. He could not help but holler in excitement in Ling Lan's mindspace, but then, his face fell and his little brow scrunched up in a frown.

These underlings were disobeying orders to come here... wasn't this just ruining his and the Boss's plans? This was so unreasonable! Little Four puffed up his cheeks in exasperation.

Little Four's alert made Ling Lan rub her forehead in consternation. It went without saying that Qi Long and the team must have met up with Gao Jinyun and found out about her situation here. Although she felt that she would not be able to fight as freely as she would have liked with Qi Long and the others here, it could not be denied that she was actually quite happy deep inside. The actions of her team meant that they really valued her — regardless of the danger, they wanted to fight by her side. Having such loyal and steadfast companions willing to brave thick and thin, life and death, together... what did she have to complain about?

"Boss, what now? Should I send them a text telling them to turn back?" Little Four was actually very glad that Qi Long and the others were coming, but thinking that this development could spoil his boss's plans, he could not help but feel a little down.

"No need. Let them come. They can help me handle those two troublesome special-class mecha in the air." Ling Lan quickly made her decision.

Perhaps, this was a chance for Qi Long and the others to grow. Mind you, fighting against special-class mecha would not give Ling Lan much experience, but it would be a rare opportunity for Qi Long and the others to gain practical experience. Although it would be a little risky, danger often went hand in hand with opportunity as it was able to force out the latent potential hiding within a person. Besides, Ling Lan was extremely confident that Qi Long and the others would grasp this opportunity well.

Chapter 371

Ace VS Ace!

"Little Four, pay attention to Qi Long and the others' location. When they are 3 kilometres from us, let me know." After coming to a decision, Ling Lan began to arrange things. "Also, listen for my commands after this."

"Understood, Boss! Emergency activation, right? Little Four will make sure to activate it successfully in the shortest time possible," Little Four accepted her orders.

Destroying team M and instant activation of mecha — all of this was possible due to Little Four's optimization of the mecha's systems. Under emergency activation, the mecha practically booted up in less than a second. If the Federation mecha researchers ever found out about this, they would be absolutely gobsmacked. They had already been researching this issue for several generations, but still they had not found a way to push an ace mecha's emergency activation period below three seconds...

The anxious team of Qi Long's moved quickly. Under the full speed of the mecha, ten kilometres were swiftly covered within three minutes.

"Three unidentified mecha discovered. Two in the air, one on the ground." Qi Long's team, which had just entered the three-kilometre boundary, heard the warning from their mecha's A.I... Due to the power difference between the mecha, only now did they learn of the enemy mecha's presence.

"Zoom in!" At first notice, they all chose to first identify whether those mecha were friend or foe. When they zoomed in to see the outer appearance of those three mecha, they all became tense. Sure enough, those mecha were enemies, and the one on the ground was actually an ace mecha. Even the two mecha in the sky were one level above their own mecha, both being special-class mecha.

"Qi Long, what do we do now?" Han Jijyun's expression turned grim at the sight of those three mecha. He was the first to speak up and prompt Qi Long — at critical moments, Han Jijyun habitually defaulted to letting Qi Long decide.

"I want to continue pushing forwards. Since we already know Boss is ahead, no matter

how dangerous it is, I still want to go over there and see what's going on," Qi Long said as he looked at those three mecha. Despite knowing that he would most likely meet a bad end if he continued pushing forwards, he could not allow himself to retreat since he knew Boss was there.

"You all can do as you like!" Qi Long had decided to take the risk, but he would not drag his companions together unwillingly. He would let them make their own decisions.

"I will go with you," said Li Lanfeng without hesitation. He had already vowed that he would never abandon the rabbit ever again — no matter how dangerous it became, even if he had to pay with his life, he would not go back on his promise.

Li Lanfeng's words had barely faded when all of the others spoke up to say that they would come along as well. They were not timid people — many years of friendship had prepared them to share one fate with their comrades.

However, Li Shiyu, who had been swindled and pressured into joining the clan, remained silent. When everyone turned to look at him, he only replied evenly, "I need to take responsibility for my patient. Wherever Qi Long goes, I go..."

"Good brother!" Qi Long said gratefully to Li Shiyu. Just as he was about to lead the way forwards, a message suddenly appeared on the team's mecha screens.

"It's Boss!" Qi Long shouted in excitement. The message was sent by Ling Lan via Little Four's abilities. Ling Lan instructed Qi Long and the rest to attack the two special-class mecha in the sky, while she very explicitly labelled the ace mecha as her prey.

"Boss has given us our assignment. We must complete it!" said Qi Long in high spirits with a swing of his fist. Up against two special-class mecha, perhaps they might have a chance.

"Yes!" Ling Lan's appearance instantly gave the clan members great mental support. With different voices but one mind, they replied confidently. Their initial hesitance and uncertainty were swept away, and even as their gazes became steady, a measure of ruthlessness appeared within them. They drew the weapons from their mecha's backs — a beam saber and a beam gun.

Their initially slowed steps sped up once more, and very soon they had emerged in front of those three enemy mecha.

"It's a group of advanced mecha, and academy training mecha at that." After taking a closer look at Qi Long's team's mecha, one of the secondary mecha in the sky could not help but spit.

The ace operator responded calmly. "That's fine. Our mission is to eliminate Qiao Ting, along with all of the cadets here. Since we haven't found Qiao Ting yet, then let's just kill these cadets first. It's all the same."

Students in the military academy who could achieve advanced mecha warrior status must also be extremely talented in terms of mecha piloting. The ace operator knew that if these students were allowed to grow unchecked, as long as they did not die, they would one day become ace operators themselves... so, the ace operator was very happy to eliminate these cadets who might become their future opponents.

As Qi Long's group of seven was charging straight at him, the ace operator thought they would be attacking him directly. However, around the 1000 metre mark ¹, those mecha suddenly revved their thrusters to sweep up from the ground into the air, leaping towards his two wingmen instead...

Was it because they had discovered he was an ace operator and so did not dare to attack him? Still, even if they decided to change targets, did they think he would just sit still and not follow them to attack? As expected of a group of academy cadets without any battle experience, actually leaving their backs exposed to an enemy... the ace operator sneered as he unhurriedly removed the high-precision laser sniper rifle from his back. That's right, he was an excellent sniper — he specialised in killing from a distance.

The ace operator quickly raised his sniper rifle to aim at the cockpits of one of the mecha...

Right then, the A.I. of Lin Zhong-qing's mecha suddenly blared a warning alarm. "Danger! Mecha has been targeted. Please evade immediately..." If this were any other time, Lin Zhong-qing would definitely have begun evasion procedures immediately, but recalling that Boss Lan had said to leave the ace operator below to him, Lin Zhong-qing gritted his teeth and ignored the A.I.'s warning. He continued to use his fastest speed to fly in a straight line towards his target.

It wasn't that Lin Zhong-qing did not want to evade, nor did he trust Ling Lan blindly, but the moment he moved to avoid being targeted, Luo Lang, who was before him,

would definitely become the enemy's target instead. It had to be said that the sniping trajectory chosen by the ace operator was just too precise — with one attack, he was aiming for two people at one time ². Whether to protect himself or to protect a teammate, it was all up to the target. No matter which choice his target made, the ace operator would not miss.

Seeing the cadet show no signs of evasion, the ace operator's eyes held a trace of pity as he said, "You've got guts. Shame..." Just as he was about to pull his trigger, a long, giant object came hurtling at him from the side, ramming into the sniper rifle in his right hand...

With a loud bang, the powerful blow jostled the grip of the mecha's right hand, causing the sniper rifle to fall to the ground. The ace operator reacted quickly. With a twist of his body, he instantly moved over 10 metres away from his original spot. At this moment, he was already facing the direction the attack had come from. A military academy trainee ace mecha had appeared where he had been standing, casually catching the giant sword which had yet to fully hit the ground.

"So you are here." The ace operator stared at his opponent and said through the external speakers, "Lieutenant Colonel Tang Yu?"

The ace mecha's question confirmed Ling Lan's suspicion that the enemy had mistaken her for Tang Yu. Ling Lan naturally would not take the effort to correct this misunderstanding — she would be able to gain practical experience and there would be someone else to take the heat for her... what else could she ask for?

And so, Ling Lan remained silent. Whether or not the opponent was certain in his assumptions, she herself would not expose her identity.

"Who'd have guessed that the elite ace of Huaxia would be stuck here in this small little military academy to be an instructor? You Huaxians really know how to waste talent." Ling Lan's silence did not dampen the interest of the ace operator, who once again spoke up to mock his opponent.

Ling Lan's lips thinned in displeasure. Why did the enemies in this air invasion have so much to say? The first advanced mecha warrior she had encountered had been a chatterbox, and this ace operator now was not much better... Ling Lan did not want to waste any time, because she knew her team members were engaged in a tough fight right now. She needed to swiftly finish off this ace operator so she could go assist her

team members.

With that, Ling Lan accelerated, leaping forwards in an oblique arc. She was before the ace operator in the blink of an eye, and the giant sword in her hands swung in a narrow trajectory, aiming straight for the opponent's waist.

Against another ace operator, she could not use the giant sword the same way she had with the advanced mecha, brainlessly plying brute force. The defence threshold of an ace mecha's outer shell itself, as well as the anti-shock systems inside, would reduce the giant sword's blunt force as much as it could, so she could not achieve a one-hit kill. Therefore, Ling Lan did not expect to defeat the other in one blow — her aim was to throw the enemy's mecha off-balance so that she would have the opportunity to execute some combo attacks after this.

However, Ling Lan's plans fell through — an ace operator was an ace operator after all. Right at the moment the giant sword was about to hit, the opponent smacked the flat of the blade with his palms. Pushing back from this smack, and engaging his thrusters, the mecha slid back several metres.

Meanwhile, the giant sword was forced to pause for a brief moment due to the force of the smack. Although it continued to swing forwards the very next second, this brief pause was enough for the opponent to find time to evade the strike.

When this attack of Ling Lan's struck air, with a swift shake of the right wrist of her mecha, Ling Lan pulled back the giant sword once more. By this time, the opponent had already drawn a beam saber from his back, which was now emitting powerful waves of energy. Seeing this, Ling Lan decisively hung her giant sword back on her back and switched to a beam saber as well.

The giant steel sword was indeed overbearing and powerful during attacks — it did not fear clashing against other steel weapons or mecha. However, it was useless against these energy-based swords, because the high electrical charge emitted by the energy swords would easily erode the internal structure of the giant steel sword. Once the energy absorption became too much, causing the inside of the sword to overheat, the steel sword would definitely lose its initial hardness and perhaps even be melted down by the energy sword. This was why Ling Lan had switched to a beam saber — she could not bear to see such a powerful cold weapon go to waste like this.

"Bam! Bam! Bam!" Consecutive sounds rang out as the two mecha clashed. The beam

sabers met again and again, violently, each collision sending countless electric sparks flying. It looked like the two were fighting evenly, none able to get one up over the other...

Meanwhile, in the air, the two secondaries of the ace operator had already been separated from each other by Qi Long's team of seven. Qi Long, Luo Lang, and Xie Yi were surrounding one special-class mecha, while Li Lanfeng and the other three were attacking the other mecha.

Chapter 372

Crisis!

Qi Long's team distributed themselves this way because Qi Long, Luo Lang, and Xie Yi already had great rapport in their attacks. Although Li Lanfeng's combat ability seemed better than Xie Yi's, in this kind of fight where teamwork was crucial, he might not work as well as Xie Yi with Qi Long and Luo Lang.

Another point was that although there was only one other mecha remaining for the rest of their team to attack, the combat ability of the other members was considerably lower than Qi Long, Luo Lang, and Xie Yi. Thus, the other group of four needed a powerful lead attacker to fend off the opponent. As a senior cadet with obviously much more mecha piloting experience than the others, Li Lanfeng was undoubtedly the best candidate. In comparison, even though Li Shiyu was also a senior, as he had specialized in military medicine, he only merited a passing grade in terms of mecha piloting. Thus, he was not suited to take up the responsibility of being the lead attacker.

Due to those various reasons, the seven people very naturally split into these two teams. Qi Long's group kept their opponent busy with their teamwork, while Li Lanfeng's group relied primarily on Li Lanfeng to hold off the enemy as the other three members coordinated themselves to attack.

In terms of danger, Li Lanfeng's group was without a doubt in more danger despite having an extra member. Not yet used to working with one another, every time they made a mistake, it was all thanks to Li Lanfeng's desperate efforts that they managed to salvage the situation. As a result, it was not long since the battle started when Li Lanfeng's mecha was scored with two deep gouges from a beam saber...

As the battle dragged on, due to their great rapport, Qi Long's group of three were acting as one, so their opponent was unable to find any openings anytime soon and could only continue to struggle with the three. However, on Li Lanfeng's side, their opponent had managed to find a weakness in their teamwork.

"Jijyun, dodge quickly!" Suddenly, Lin Zhong-qing's shocked voice rang out in Ling Lan's team's commlink. Qi Long's hands could not help but slow for a brief moment — if Luo Lang and Xie Yi had not moved in time to cover for him, a flaw might have

opened up in their teamwork...

Ling Lan was currently exchanging blows with her opponent; she had just dashed backwards in preparation for her next attack when she heard this horrified shout. She quickly lifted her head to look over and saw Li Lanfeng pilot his mecha to slam Han Jijyun's mecha out of the way in mid-air as he forcibly received the opponent's beam saber attack.

"Zing..." The beam saber struck the mecha and countless sparks were sent flying. The power behind a special-class operator's beam saber was not something an advanced mecha's beam shield could completely deflect. The beam shield's power suddenly dimmed... Li Lanfeng was just about to use his own beam saber to parry the other's beam saber away when, taking advantage of Li Lanfeng's attention being turned to his weapon, the enemy lifted his leg and kicked down savagely.

With a loud "boom", the special-class mecha's right leg struck the chest of Li Lanfeng's mecha with great force, instantly sending Li Lanfeng crashing towards the ground.

Perhaps due to the tremendous force behind the blow, Li Lanfeng temporarily lost the ability to control his mecha. Li Lanfeng's mecha completely lost balance as he plummeted towards the ground. Within the blink of an eye, he had crashed into the ground with a loud boom, sending up a blanket of dirt and dust into the air at the same time...

Ling Lan's heart clenched at the sight — could the leopard have come to harm?

After that special-class mecha kicked Li Lanfeng to the ground, he did not stop his attack there. He coldly lifted the beam saber in his mecha's left arm and aimed it at the mecha lying on the ground, ready to send the other to hell...

Realising what was going to happen, Li Shiyu and Lin Zhong-qing pounced frenziedly towards the special-class mecha from both sides. Meanwhile, Han Jijyun, who had been thrown quite a distance away from the push earlier, clenched his teeth and pulled the trigger on his beam gun desperately, trying to use his attacks to hinder the other from attacking.

Seeing how critical the situation was, Ling Lan quickly shifted on the balls of her feet and controlled her mecha to retreat rapidly, preparing herself to rush to Li Lanfeng's aid. But how could her opponent just let Ling Lan do as she wished? Moreover, he had

the upper hand right now, so of course he had to stop Ling Lan from heading over to assist. Rather speedily, he flew over and blocked Ling Lan and said in a cold tone, "Don't forget, I am your opponent."

Ling Lan looked at the enemy blocking her way and her expression turned cold. The killing intent in her eyes shone clearly for the first time since the fight began... no one could see but within her cockpit, Ling Lan's body was now enveloped by a thick miasma of blood-red killing intent. The killing intent spread rapidly and had soon even leaked out to the outside.

The ace operator across from her suddenly felt a chill run through his body. Before he could figure out the reason behind it, Ling Lan's attack was already at his face.

This time, Ling Lan's attack was even fiercer and even more domineering. In the fight before this, Ling Lan had only been using 60 to 70 percent of her power to attack. In other words, she had held back at least 30 percent of her strength as a reserve for defence. But now, in order to finish off the opponent quickly, Ling Lan no longer held anything back and was attacking with her full strength. Either the opponent died or she died — this was a path of no return.

Sensing the clear difference in his opponent, the ace operator's bearing turned grim and serious as well. He did not dare to spare any mind on anything else now, putting his entire focus into countering Ling Lan's attack. Still, a question flashed across his mind — for Tang Yu to be so concerned over that mecha, could it be that the one piloting it was his student Qiao Ting?

At the thought of this possibility, the ace operator was moved. After fending off one of Ling Lan's attacks, riding the momentum, he moved back several steps to pull a distance away from Ling Lan. He then swiftly connected to his team's commlink and said to his two secondaries, "Do your utmost to destroy that mecha on the ground. That is very likely to be Qiao Ting."

There was no rule that the ace level Qiao Ting had to operate an ace mecha... they might have been limited by this fixed mentality.

At their superior's words, the two secondaries were taken aback, but they trusted their team leader very much. If their team leader believed this was so, then that mecha could truly be Qiao Ting.

Once again evading those annoying advanced mecha, the two special-class mecha raised the beam guns in their hands almost simultaneously to aim at the mecha on the ground and pulled the trigger... two beams rent the air as they shot downwards, flying right at the mecha lying on the ground.

"Leopard! Dodge quickly!" Ling Lan, who was once again clashing with the ace operator, had still been keeping an eye on Li Lanfeng's situation. When she saw the two beams flying at Li Lanfeng, her eyes were wide in anger and concern as she yelled loudly.

"Pew pew!" The two beams hit the ground, once again sending up countless amounts of dust and dirt. For some time, all the mecha's screens were obscured, preventing them from seeing the situation on the ground clearly. No one could tell whether those two beams had actually struck Li Lanfeng.

The ace operator's heart was filled with joy at the sight. He felt that the other most definitely did not have any chance to avoid the blasts. Besides, he also had faith in the shooting skills of his team members — they definitely would have shot accurately at the other's cockpit. The cockpit was the most defensibly weak area on a mecha ¹, and there was just no way a mecha without the protection of a beam shield would have been able to withstand two beam shots.

The ace operator stayed back, waiting for the dust to settle so that he could enjoy the fruits of victory, when he abruptly found that the enemy before him had not become at all flustered by this turn of events. In fact, the other had even become even more focused and centred...

The opponent had controlled his mecha to retreat swiftly, pulling about 10 metres away from the ace operator. The ace operator thought that the opponent was planning to run over to the advanced mecha's side to attempt a rescue, but just as he was about to charge over to intercept the opponent, he found that the other was merely pausing for a moment before leaping back at him at high speed.

The ace mecha's gaze narrowed. This kind of nearly delay-less operation not only had high requirements in terms of control skills but also placed a great burden on the operator's body. This type of manoeuvre pushed great feedback force on the operator — thus, in order to protect themselves, if the situation was not critical, most people would not resort to this.

Before the ace operator could do anything, he was rendered dumbstruck once more because the other's silhouette had disappeared from his mecha's screens...

No, it could not be said that he had lost sight of the other — rather, the other had suddenly split into two shadowy figures which were now gliding towards him from both sides. Briefly stunned, the ace operator's expression changed rapidly immediately afterwards. He had realised that what the other was displaying was a top-level technique of ace operators. It was the Shadow Clone technique which even he was not sure he could pull off.

Of these two shadowy figures, one was real while the other was fake. He needed to determine which was which in an instant — if he judged wrongly, he was sure to receive a serious hit.

The ace operator gritted his teeth. He did not choose any one side to attack, instead controlling his mecha to retreat swiftly. He did not like to gamble, especially this sort of gamble which relied solely on luck. Hence, he chose to retreat.

The ace operator thought that as long as he backed off quick and far enough, he would definitely be able to crack the opponent's move. Unexpectedly, after retreating as far as 20 metres, the two shadows were still trailing him without any sign of dissipating — he was still stuck in the same predicament as before.

"This is impossible!" exclaimed the ace operator. No matter how skilled an ace operator was, they would still only be able to maintain a shadow clone for up to 10 metres or so. However, the opponent had managed to double the distance — this made it impossible for the ace operator to keep his composure any longer.

Just then, he heard a great force slam into his mecha's right-hand side. His mecha which had still been moving backwards swiftly was completely thrown off-balance by this sudden impact, causing it to tumble out towards the left side...

The ace operator knew he had been struck by the enemy. He was silently grateful that he had increased his mecha's beam shield to its maximum defence value right before the attack had hit when he had felt something off about the situation. This meant that even though his mecha had been forced to take a blow from the other's beam saber, the defensive power of his beam shield had been able to completely neutralise the energy attack, ensuring that his mecha remained undamaged. As long as he could stabilise his mecha quickly, he would still be able to regain control of the situation...

However, before the ace operator could fully appreciate his relief, his mecha's A.I. began to blare a loud warning. "Warning, mecha's right side severely damaged. Right side mobility reduced by 40%. Defence of damaged area reduced by 80%... Warning, damaged area cannot withstand a second attack!"

"What in the world is going on?" As the mobility of his mecha had been damaged on the right side, the ace operator was unable to take control of his mecha and stabilise himself as easily as he had imagined. Instead, he continued to tilt and fall towards the ground — in the next second, he might just crash.

The ace operator was still an ace operator after all; even in this unexpected situation, he still managed to calmly change his control method. He shifted so that his left arm would hit the ground palm-first, then pushed off it to send his falling mecha springing up into the air once more...

Chapter 373

Mutual Destruction!

If his opponent had been a mecha operator with normal control skills, or perhaps just an inexperienced ace operator, perhaps the ace operator would have been able to salvage the situation. However, his opponent was neither. Skills? Ling Lan had that in spades. Experience? After many years of torment by the learning space, even the greenest of newbies would have become a veteran mecha operator.

Just as the ace operator bounced his mecha back into the air, his back was struck heavily once again. This time, the blow was even heavier than the one before, instantly knocking his mecha down hard onto the ground, giving him no more chances to get up again.

"Boom!" The large body of the mecha crashed into the ground, sending clouds of dust into the air... this loud noise drew the attention of the mecha fighting in the sky. Looking down, the two special-class mecha were instantly dumbfounded. They could not help but cry out, "Leader!" and their movements inevitably slowed down.

Leaving aside Li Shiyu, Han Jijyun, and Lin Zhong-qing for the moment, along with the special-class mecha they were fighting, Qi Long, Luo Lang, and Xie Yi with their great rapport saw their opponent's movements slow down and almost simultaneously realised that their chance had come...

Qi Long was the one who reacted the quickest. Possessing Animal Instinct, this fellow noticed the opponent's opening almost immediately. He was the first to pounce, his beam saber striking out fiercely at the other's slowed beam saber. Due to being distracted, the special-class mecha's beam saber was directly pushed aside by Qi Long's forceful blade. Before the other could regain his bearings, Qi Long's beam saber was already slashing out viciously at the other's wide open chest area...

"Zing..." The piercing sound of a beam saber clashing against a mecha's beam shield rang out. Sparks flew where the two met.

That special-class mecha's expression changed the instant he was hit. He was a little panicked, but when he saw his mecha's beam shield holding out in defence, he

instantly calmed down. He saw his opponent desperately steadying his beam saber, holding it by force against his beam shield to try and exhaust his mecha's power. He knew this was his chance to counterattack! A ruthless light appeared in his eyes. He controlled his mecha's right hand to swing his beam saber savagely at his opponent...

There was a "boom" — the beam saber was intercepted before it could hit. Another mecha had charged over as well to use his beam saber to block his own beam saber. Not only that, the other also raised his other hand to aim right at his cockpit... the beam gun in his opponent's hand which he had thought nothing of previously now loomed large in his vision, a sight to inspire terror.

The muzzle of the gun flashed with a white light, and his mecha was struck heavily. Although a special-class mecha's beam shield was stronger than an advanced mecha's — one beam shot would not do any damage to his mecha — but the opponent obviously would not just shoot once. If he could not find a way to break free from these two enemies, the final outcome would certainly be his beam shield running out of energy resulting in his death.

No one wanted to die, and he was no exception. He knew that only by accelerating to retreat and breaking free of their hold on him now could he have any chance of surviving. Thus, he engaged all his thrusters, pushing his speed to the maximum — he just needed one second to completely escape from their attacks... right as the mecha's speed indicator showed a shift to overdrive, his mecha hurtled backwards abruptly... he saw his mecha escaping the other's beam saber — even if the opponents pushed their engines to pursue him, the difference between their mecha levels made it impossible for them to match his speed.

The special-class operator finally let out a sigh of relief. He knew the danger had almost passed. As long as he could avoid this crisis, he would definitely kill these few bastards... right then, the back of his mecha was suddenly struck by a great force, stopping the mecha retreating in overdrive in its tracks. At this moment, the beam saber he had just pulled away from once again struck his mecha, while the other opponent's beam gun was triggered one more without mercy...

"Awesome, Xie Yi!" Qi Long could not help but shout. It turned out that Xie Yi had been piloting his mecha to attack from behind when he suddenly saw the opponent retreating in overdrive. He immediately changed his movements to use his side to ram into the opponent, stopping the special-class mecha from retreating any further...

Trapped in a pincer attack, no matter how much power the special-class mecha's beam shield had, it could not hold up against the frenzied attacks from the beam sabers and beam guns of the group of three. In the end, the mecha's beam shield dimmed and then disappeared completely...

Qi Long decisively cast aside his own darkened beam saber, his hands swiping down to grip the two high-frequency blades that had sprung out from the sides of his mecha's thighs. Then, he fiercely plunged the two high-frequency blades into the opponent's cockpit...

No longer defended by a beam shield, even the cockpit of a special-class mecha was unable to prevent a high-frequency blade from stabbing through...

"Ah..." screamed the special-class operator. Qi Long's attack was very accurate, directly piercing through a vital point. The special-class operator knew he was unlikely to escape death. With a savage grin, he ruthlessly pulled up the self-destruct system of his mecha...

Qi Long's Animal Instinct was very sensitive. As soon as the opponent pulled up the self-destruct system, he sensed danger and quickly shouted, "Run!"

The three boys scattered in three different directions. They had just flown away when that special-class mecha exploded. The explosion created by the self-destruct sequence of a special-class mecha was unlike that of a normal mecha — although the three boys had instantly dialled their beam shields to their maximum defence value, the shields were still unable to fully neutralize the force of the explosion. The three mecha were instantly thrown off-balance, spinning out of control to crash into the ground below.

Xie Yi took the worst hit. Because he had been immobilizing the opponent, he had had the least time to dodge and run. As such, he had been exposed to more of the blast force than the others, instantly being thrown by the explosion into the forest. Only after crashing into and snapping several large trees did he fall to the ground...

Even though their method had been mutually damaging, Qi Long, Luo Lang, and Xie Yi had still finished off their opponent in the end. Without Li Lanfeng, the remaining three in the other group — Li Shiyu, Lin Zhong-qing, and Han Jijun — attacked the other special-class mecha from two sides. Their situation was tough, perhaps even somewhat perilous — if Ling Lan had not managed to strike down the ace operator,

causing their opponent to pause in his attack out of shock, they would not have been able to stop to catch their breath.

This fight had shown them that there was still a huge gap between them and an experienced special-class operator. If not for Li Lanfeng's efforts to protect them from the start, perhaps the three of them would have already had to withdraw from the battle. Even so, their primary attacker Li Lanfeng had still been struck down...

Li Shiyu looked at the special-class mecha before his eyes and mentally cursed his own helplessness. He could not save his eldest cousin brother, and now he also could not save another Li family member, Li Lanfeng ¹. If only his mecha control skills were stronger, then Li Lanfeng would not have been... Li Shiyu's only wish now was that the two beam shots had not struck Li Lanfeng, even though the chances of this wish coming true were miniscule...

Similarly, Han Jijyun, who was panting heavily in his cockpit, was currently cursing himself during this short period of rest they had gained. At the heart of it, Li Lanfeng had fallen to save him. The one who should have been thrown to the ground was actually him — those last two beam shots should also have been his to bear. However, Li Lanfeng had taken his place to suffer all this. If Han Jijyun could be said to have harboured some doubts still about Li Lanfeng's motives for joining the New Cadet Regiment, he no longer felt the same way about it now. Which idiot would be so stupid as to manipulate his way into an opponent's faction and then selflessly sacrifice himself for the sake of his opponent? He had truly misunderstood Li Lanfeng, thought Han Jijyun with regret.

Meanwhile, Lin Zhong-qing kept a watchful eye on the special-class mecha. Even as he was recovering his strength, he asked himself silently: if he was faced with the same situation, would he have been able to make the same choice as Li Lanfeng?

Lin Zhong-qing found that he could not answer yes without hesitation — this made him feel somewhat ashamed. Li Lanfeng had just joined the team, but he was already able to treat the other team members as his own brothers, willing to sacrifice himself to protect them. In comparison, he had followed Boss Lan for so long in this team, but he still could not be sure whether he could do the same... was this the difference between him and Li Lanfeng? The other was truly a selfless and sincere person, just as sunny and warm as his smile. He was kind and friendly, definitely not at all a person like himself, who had come out from a black-hearted, scheming, dark and sinister laboratory, could hope to compare to...

How enviable!

Lin Zhong-qing thought with a bitter smile. The feeling Li Lanfeng gave off was completely different from Boss Lan. Without having to say a word, Boss Lan already would have an overbearing aura just sitting in silence. One gaze from Boss Lan was enough to make others cower; his dominance was unparalleled. He gave courage to those who followed him, secure in his strength. His followers would not cower, retreat, or hesitate, and of course, they never felt lost. He was like a steady rock in a roiling sea — by his side, there was nothing to fear and nothing to worry about. As long as they followed him loyally, Boss Lan would lead them to a grand new world. This was the power of a hegemon, causing others to inevitably believe in him, entrust their dreams to him, and follow in his footsteps.

In contrast, at first sight, Li Lanfeng already came off as the older brother living next door. It was impossible to reject his warmth and friendliness — his ever-smiling face made others inevitably think fondly of him. Unconsciously, he would have silently obtained your trust, gaining the status of an important friend or relative in your mind... like now, even though he had not had much interaction with Li Lanfeng thus far, he had already fully accepted the other as a friend. Of course, the other's actions had indeed left him with no objections.

Some people were heaven-blessed to be liked by others, such as this Li Lanfeng!

These thoughts went by in a flash across Lin Zhong-qing's mind, and the temporary break was quickly over. Just when Qi Long's team of three had begun their fierce attack on their special-class operator opponent, the special-class operator fighting Li Shiyu's team saw that his teammate was in a tight spot and wanted to go and help. However, how could Li Shiyu and the others allow the other to do so? Without even having to think about it, they charged over to block the special-class mecha...

Li Shiyu and the other two did all they could and finally managed to delay the special-class mecha for about ten seconds. And these ten seconds were enough to pronounce the end of the other special-class mecha.

Chapter 374

He's Still Alive!

Witnessing his teammate die via self-destruction, the remaining special-class mecha finally went berserk. His eyes turned crimson as he stared at the three advanced mecha in front of him who had prevented him from going to the aid of his friend. The killing intent in his heart rose to an apex — he must definitely kill this rabble and avenge his comrade!

Anger could produce two different effects in humans. One was the loss of rationality due to extreme rage, causing an inability to fully utilise one's true combat power. This type of rage effect was a negative influence and was something mecha operators should strive to avoid. Meanwhile, the other effect was a manifold increase in one's combat power, and this type of effect was called outburst. When a mecha operator achieved special-class operator status, they would definitely go through the cultivation of this type of outburst...

Thus, this special-class operator's combat power grew exponentially under the force of his rage. This caused the already struggling Li Shiyu, Han Jijyun, and Lin Zhong-qing to be dragged into an even more dangerous situation...

"Be careful, Li Shiyu..." Seeing Han Jijyun get thrown aside by the opponent's attack, Li Shiyu was just about to step in when he heard Lin Zhong-qing yell from one side.

Only then did Li Shiyu notice that the special-class mecha had at sometime, somehow, appeared right before his face. Perhaps his attention had been on Han Jijyun, distracting him from noticing the opponent's movements in time. In spite of Lin Zhong-qing's loud warning, he found that he already had no time to evade...

Li Shiyu gritted his teeth and turned his beam shield's defence to its maximum value, preparing himself to take the opponent's attack by force...

With a "bang", Li Shiyu felt his mecha being struck by a tremendous force. His entire person was sent flying out to the side — the juddering mecha which had completely lost its balance due to the collision made Li Shiyu's vision black out for a brief moment.

However, Li Shiyu had been secretly injecting himself with modified gene agent these past few years, so though his physical constitution was still incomparable to the odd child Qi Long's, it was still better than average. He recovered after just half a second. Off-balance, Li Shiyu did not panic. He calmly moved his fingers, operating his mecha, attempting to regain control of his mecha as fast as possible.

Li Shiyu knew well that only if he managed to regain control of his mecha would he have any chance of counterattacking. As Li Shiyu calmly focused on his controls, he did not forget to glance every so often at the situation outside of his mecha. He needed to know what was going on — was the enemy planning to follow up with more attacks?

During one glance, his hand abruptly stuttered. His initially calm eyes turned red in an instant, and he actually felt his eyes grow wet. A mecha was fending off the special-class mecha with a beam saber...

Li Lanfeng! He was still alive! This was great! For the first time, Li Shiyu felt that happiness was such a simple thing!

Right then, on the ground, the ace operator who had received a heavy blow to his back heard his mecha's A.I. emit another loud warning. "Warning! Damage to mecha's main drive systems at 60%. Danger, danger! Please retreat immediately, please retreat immediately!"

When the ace operator heard the A.I.'s warning, he pounded the control panel before him in frustration. Just then, his heart clenched violently as an unprecedented sense of danger settled over him. Cold sweat poured from his forehead instantly. Perhaps due to the pressure of this life-or-death situation, the rate of his fingers dancing over the controls exceeded his initial limits in that instant...

The ace mecha lying on the ground suddenly rolled away, causing Ling Lan's forceful stab with her giant sword to miss. The giant sword easily pierced up to two metres deep into the ground. And this was still after Ling Lan had pulled back her strength, otherwise the sword might have gone in all the way to the hilt.

Having narrowly escaped, the ace operator looked up at the only special-class mecha remaining in the sky and knew that the other mecha had most likely met an unfortunate end. He smiled wryly and said, "You've long known that those two shots did not hit your student." Otherwise, the opponent could not have been so calm and collected. In contrast, he had relaxed too soon at that moment. This was one of the

reasons behind his failure. At the thought, the ace operator's heart was filled with regret — if only he had been able to keep calm and focused back then as well, the outcome might have been very different.

Right up till this point, the ace operator still believed that his opponent was the Federation's elite ace Tang Yu, while the one piloting that advanced mecha which had fallen was Qiao Ting.

Ling Lan did not reply, merely pulling the giant sword out from the ground. As she did this, her icy gaze did not shift at all from the ace mecha lying on the ground. Before utterly destroying the other, Ling Lan would not let down her guard; Ling Lan would not commit such a rookie mistake.

"Your students are really good. Who'd have guessed that the three of them could work so well together that they managed to take down one of my men? That's a special-class operator, you know, a whole level higher than your students... and I too have lost at your hands. You are truly an elite ace of your Federation. I have lost." The ace operator was not at all bothered by Ling Lan's cold indifference. He continued to blather on, appearing as if he had already given up and was planning to surrender without putting up a fight.

Seeing this, a thought flashed through Ling Lan's mind. She rested the giant sword in her right hand on the ground and put her left hand on the hilt as well, as if using it as a crutch, seemingly announcing that she no longer planned to fight...

The initially tense atmosphere disappeared all at once due to Ling Lan's actions. Unexpectedly, it was at this moment that the ace mecha suddenly leapt up to lunge fiercely at Ling Lan... it turned out that everything he had just said and his entire demeanour had all been an act to get Ling Lan to lower her guard. Since they had come to participate in the invasion of planet Newline, they had already been prepared to sacrifice their lives in service of their country. Even if he failed, he would aim for mutual destruction instead of just surrendering meekly.

Faced with the enemy's sudden attack, Ling Lan was not at all flustered or taken by surprise. Her seemingly relaxed actions were actually just to play along with the opponent's act — from the very beginning, she had never intended to let any of these enemies go... she would never show mercy to anyone who tried to harm her companions.

Already gripping the hilt of her giant sword, her two hands abruptly lifted and the giant sword sprang up to clash violently with the opponent mecha once more. After staying locked together for several seconds, the two fighters sprang apart again...

No, it should be said that the opponent mecha was flung back by the giant sword. Meanwhile, Ling Lan's mecha backed off rapidly under the force of her thrusters, pulling over 10 metres away from the enemy in an instant...

"Boom!" A massive blast rang out. The ace mecha Ling Lan had flung away from her exploded, breaking into countless pieces flying through the air.

It turned out that the opponent knew very well that he no longer had any chance of victory. However, he also did not want to simply be killed by the opponent, so he had chosen to self-destruct, intending to take Ling Lan along with him. Fortunately, Ling Lan had sensed the danger right away and even as she flung the opponent away from her, she had engaged her thrusters to send her mecha flying back swiftly, thus evading this crisis.

Still, the concussive force of an ace mecha's self-destruct was incomparable to that of a normal mecha. Despite retreating swiftly to pull a distance away at first notice, escaping the most dangerous blast zone, Ling Lan still had not been able to completely escape the explosion. The blast had still injured Ling Lan. She felt as if her chest had been struck by a heavy boulder, the coppery taste of blood rising up at the back of her throat. Involuntarily, Ling Lan opened her mouth and blood spurted out, staining the bright screen before her red...

"Boss, are you alright?!" Seeing Ling Lan injured, Little Four cried out in panic.

Ling Lan immediately circulated her qi and ran through the qi exercises, and soon, the heavy feeling in her chest and sense of nausea faded. Her whole body relaxed and she could tell that it had only been a minor internal injury, nothing serious, so she reassured Little Four by saying, "I'm fine. It was just some residual blast force. I actually feel much better after throwing up some blood."

Little Four instantly calmed down after hearing Ling Lan's answer. Having caught her breath, Ling Lan looked up into the sky once more...

"Are Qi Long and the others alright?" Ling Lan naturally knew that Qi Long's group of three had been sent flying by the blast of the special-class mecha's self-destruct.

Although Little Four had already reported back then that Qi Long and the others were fine, Ling Lan was still rather worried. However, back then she had been in the midst of fighting with the ace operator and had not had the time to ask Little Four for details. Now, she finally had the time to spare.

"They're fine. They've only been dazed by the blast..." Little Four had already entered their mecha's systems to examine the condition of Qi Long's group. Xie Yi was in the worst condition, but it was all just external injuries so there was no risk of death. As such, Little Four did not pay any more mind to the three boys. Instead, what Little Four was more interested in now was Li Lanfeng who was currently fighting in the air. "Boss, your leopard seems to have advanced a level."

What is this 'your leopard'? Ling Lan threw a cool glance over at Little Four, warning him to watch his words, but unfortunately Little Four could be rather slow on the uptake sometimes... he did not notice Ling Lan's cold and cutting gaze at all, still continuing to say with a dumb and innocent expression, "His control skills are now much more impressive than before. Looks like the life-or-death situation earlier has triggered his latent potential, spurring an advancement. As expected, he is just like you, Boss, a freak. If he weren't family, he wouldn't have entered through the same door ¹, eh?" mused Little Four.

Those people who could successfully bring out their latent potential and advance in a life-or-death situation would undoubtedly all become aberrant talents. This kind of advancement was much rarer than normal advancement — the insight Li Lanfeng would gain from this experience would be much greater and much deeper than if he had advanced normally. It could be said that for anyone who advanced from insights gained during a life-or-death situation, advancing to the next level after this was pretty much guaranteed. In other words, as long as he gained enough experience, Li Lanfeng was sure to at least become an ace mecha master in future. Oh, how much envy did this bring to those mecha operators who found themselves stuck all their lives at special-class...

Originally, when Ling Lan heard that Li Lanfeng had advanced, she was very happy, but that final phrase of Little Four's made her somewhat annoyed. Ling Lan unceremoniously flicked a forceful finger at Little Four's forehead and said scornfully, "Where did you learn such inappropriate words?" Did this little fellow not know that that saying originally referred to husband and wife?

Being flicked out of the blue, Little Four guilelessly rubbed his forehead. He blinked

his big eyes mournfully, unsure why his boss was abusing him again now.

This pitiful appearance of Little Four's made Ling Lan rather speechless. Fine, getting angry at this fellow was a waste of energy. He must have just picked up the phrase from some random ancient text and started using it without fully understanding it...

Ling Lan decided not to argue any further with Little Four. She peered intently at the mecha's screen, which was focused on Li Lanfeng and the special-class mecha's fight. After observing several exchanges between the fighters, she said approvingly, "You're right, Little Four. In that life-or-death situation earlier, he really managed to advance. Perhaps this was why he managed to escape those two shots... what a shame that he's piloting an advanced mecha. If he were piloting a special-class mecha now, this would not be the current situation." Although Li Lanfeng was keeping up with the special-class mecha's attacks, the gap between the two mecha had still put Li Lanfeng at a disadvantage so he could only defend passively.

Chapter 375

A Physical Constitution Problem?

"Even so, it's not easy for the opponent to kill him. Your leopard can still hold out for quite a while. Moreover, there are no other enemies around. This is a good opportunity to let your leopard fight a bit more. Perhaps this will make it easier for him to find his own control style."

Since there were no other enemies nearby, Little Four also became relaxed. Holding a lollipop he had whisked out from god knows where, he licked it as he gave his opinion. Little Four, who had constantly been exchanging ideas with Instructor Number Three, seemed to have the flair of a mecha instructor about him at the moment. Of course, one would first have to overlook the lollipop in his hand and that stumpy body and immature face.

Ling Lan fully agreed with Little Four's suggestion — this was undoubtedly an opportunity for the leopard to once again raise his abilities. She decided to stand by and watch for the moment, and so instructed Little Four, "Little Four, monitor our surroundings closely. If any enemies approach, notify me immediately." That said, Ling Lan clenched her fist around the giant sword in her hand. If any enemies really approached, she would have to attack to guarantee her companions' safety.

In response, Little Four patted his chest and promised to take care of everything.

Ling Lan thought about how Little Four would make some careless mistakes from time to time, but he had never disappointed her when it came to the big things. So, she relaxed and left him to it. She piloted her mecha to execute a swift flash move, and her mecha disappeared on the spot. In the next second, she had appeared next to Luo Lang, who had been the closest to her previous location.

Although Little Four had repeated once more that Qi Long's team of three was fine, having only been knocked out by the blast, Ling Lan was still concerned and wanted to check on them personally.

Meanwhile, at this moment, the five-mecha fight in the skies had in fact already become a showdown between Li Lanfeng and the special-class mecha. Li Shiyu, Han

Jiyyun, and Lin Zhong-qing could do nothing to interfere in the fight. They could at most look on from afar and find some opportunities to shoot their beam guns to assist Li Lanfeng.

This development was partly because the opponent's strength had multiplied due to his rage-induced outburst, so the boys could not go up and block as they had before. If they tried to block or intercept the enemy, they would definitely be shaken off by a forceful blade. In terms of power, they were already unable to fight against the special-class mecha now.

Another reason for this development was that the returned Li Lanfeng had similarly gone through a vertical increase in combat power. Even though he was piloting an advanced mecha, he was not losing to the other by much in terms of strength and technique. Many times, when the other boys had accidentally stumbled into danger, it was all thanks to Li Lanfeng that they managed to escape unscathed. These occurrences let them know that they should no longer get involved in this fight.

After fighting with the other for about 2 minutes, Li Lanfeng finally got used to the opponent's attack power and tempo, and the situation began to take a turn for the better for him. This caused the three boys observing from the side-lines to feel some relief — they had been very afraid that Li Lanfeng would end up in a perilous situation at any moment while fighting solo against the special-class operator, so their hearts had been lodged in their throats all this while.

The moment Ling Lan came up to Luo Lang's mecha, she saw that its beam shield had buffered the blast of the special-class mecha's self-destruct, so much so that its glow was almost imperceptible, making the entire mecha look dull. The outer shell of the mecha was covered in countless scars, some shallow some deep. Some of the scars had even gone so deep that she could almost see the intricate gears and circuits peeking out. However, most fortunately, there was no fatal damage around the most defensibly weak cockpit area. Ling Lan's tense emotions eased; she knew Luo Lang was in no big trouble.

Just then, Little Four, who had been monitoring the aerial fight all this while, turned with bright eyes to Ling Lan to report that Luo Lang was stirring within the cockpit.

Ling Lan immediately connected to Luo Lang's commlink and shouted, "Luo Lang, it's me, Ling Lan. Please respond."

"Boss..." After calling out several times, Luo Lang's feeble voice finally responded from the other end of the line.

"Are you injured? Do you need Li Shiyu to treat you?" asked Ling Lan worriedly.

"It's fine, Boss. Before we left, Senior Shiyu had already given us several emergency healing agents just in case. I've just taken some, and I feel much better now." Luo Lang's voice was much stronger than before, proving that his condition was indeed improving.

Receiving confirmation that Luo Lang was fine, Ling Lan was just about to go check on Qi Long who was about 50 metres away when she saw Qi Long's mecha sit up abruptly.

A frisson of happiness passed through Ling Lan's heart and she was by Qi Long's side in the very next second. "Qi Long, how do you feel?"

Little Four had said Qi Long's injuries were roughly the same as Luo Lang's. Now, from the looks of it, the aberrant physical constitution of Qi Long's was no joke. Luo Lang's injuries had to be treated slowly by the emergency healing agents, while Qi Long's condition was obviously much better even without taking them.

Sure enough, Qi Long's reply proved this point. "I'm fine, Boss. I was just dazed for a bit. My body isn't injured at all." Qi Long's loud and powerful voice proved that he was still hale and hearty...

"Since you're fine, let's go check on Xie Yi together. I think that Xie Yi is injured pretty badly this time," said Ling Lan to Qi Long. She was much more worried about Xie Yi. The two of them quickly entered the forest and found Xie Yi who had been blasted through several towering trees by the blast.

As it turned out, Ling Lan's prediction was not wrong. Xie Yi was truly the one in the worst condition. Having been the closest to the self-destructing mecha, he had received the most blast force from the explosion. Right after that, his mecha had gone through several consecutive collisions with the trees, causing it to be extremely battered. The entire mecha no longer sported any bit of the glow from its beam shield. The mecha's whole body was a dull sheet of grey.

Besides that, there was no way the mecha itself could have remained intact. Its left arm was completely broken at the shoulder, revealing various broken wires underneath, sparking in the air, while its right leg had been pulverized into dust by the

explosion. Meanwhile, the cockpit was already pitted with dents, and there was a deep gouge starting from its edge moving up diagonally...

Following the path of that frightening gouge on the cockpit, Qi Long's face paled drastically and he immediately controlled his mecha to squat and then swiftly opened his mecha's cockpit door. He could not wait for the landing platform to descend; Qi Long chose to leap down directly from the cockpit.

Landing on the ground, Qi Long rolled with the momentum to release the residual force safely. Then, he sprang up from the ground and using all of his limbs, he climbed up to Xie Yi's cockpit.

The cockpit passcode for all members of a team was the same. The reason for that was precisely just in case this kind of situation occurred where a teammate needed help. Qi Long clamped his fingers down on an area to the left of the cockpit, and then pulled with force, prying a small metal cover loose to reveal a numerical keypad. He swiftly keyed in a string of numbers and then with a 'click', the internal lock of the cockpit opened. The cockpit hatch automatically sprang open soon after, revealing an opening wide enough for an adult to enter.

Qi Long immediately ducked inside and not long after, he had brought Xie Yi out in his arms. Xie Yi was currently unconscious, traces of blood at the corners of his mouth, a sign that he had thrown up blood from his injuries. It looked like he had sustained some pretty serious internal injuries.

"What's Xie Yi's condition?" asked Ling Lan worriedly at the sight.

"Not too bad. He has just suffered some internal injury. I've already fed him Senior Shiyu's emergency healing agents. He should be fine." Qi Long's complexion had regained some colour. When he had first entered the cockpit and saw Xie Yi pale and barely breathing, he had almost been scared out of his wits. He had truly been afraid that this cheerful punk who had been with them for over three years would leave them just like that.

However, Senior Shiyu's emergency healing agents were really amazing. Only a few seconds after pouring them down Xie Yi's throat, Xie Yi's complexion had improved considerably and his breathing had also stabilised. It looked like they needed to have a good, long talk with Senior Shiyu in the future, thought Qi Long as he glanced at Li Shiyu in the air, who was still trying to find some opportunity to shoot.

Knowing that Xie Yi was fine now, Ling Lan relaxed and gave Qi Long instructions to take care of Xie Yi.

"Got it, Boss," answered Qi Long gravely. He walked back to his own mecha and boarded the elevation platform. He carefully carried Xie Yi into his own mecha and buckled him in securely in the auxiliary seat.

After settling all of this, only then did Qi Long close his cockpit and activate his mecha to rise up into the air again. Qi Long was well aware that from this point onwards, he was not only fighting for himself anymore; he was also fighting to protect Xie Yi. He needed to ensure that his mecha was not taken down because other than himself, Xie Yi was inside his mecha as well.

"Xie Yi, we must survive," said Qi Long under his breath, a savage light in his eyes. Rather than speaking to Xie Yi, he was saying this more for his own benefit.

Focused on his own controls, Qi Long did not notice the unconscious Xie Yi emit an almost inaudible sound of agreement in response —— hn!

After Xie Yi was transferred to Qi Long's mecha, Ling Lan felt much more reassured. Having handled the matter of Qi Long's team of three, Ling Lan finally turned her full attention to the still fighting Li Lanfeng.

"Eh? Actually fighting evenly with the other now?" Ling Lan was rather stunned. When she had gone to check on Luo Lang, Li Lanfeng was still at a disadvantage, only able to defend without being able to counterattack.

"Yeah, Boss, your leopard is truly very talented in mecha piloting. He has adapted very quickly to his new abilities after advancing and has forced out the full potential of the advanced mecha," explained Little Four upon seeing his boss's surprise at the scene. He had been keeping an eye on Li Lanfeng's fight all this while.

"Hn, the leopard's mecha control talent is indeed excellent." From the start, Ling Lan had already known this. When the two of them had practised their basic controls together, she had obtained so much extra practise time due to the cheating device, the learning space, but in the end, her results had only been that little bit better than the leopard's. If she had not had the extra buff of this cheat, perhaps she would have already lost to the leopard back then.

Little Four heard Ling Lan echo his words and instantly smiled widely. However, he

soon scrunched up his little dumpling face again. Eyebrows knitted in puzzlement, he said, "However, your leopard seems to have some problems with his physical constitution."

Ling Lan quirked a brow. "What do you mean?"

"Your leopard's stamina seems like it'll be depleted soon... he can at most fight for another 2 minutes." Having monitored him all this while, Little Four was very clear about Li Lanfeng's current condition.

Chapter 376

Don't Lose to Yourself!

Little Four's words made Ling Lan frown. Indeed, in the virtual world, when they had been doing the clan-formation mission, she had also noticed this weakness of the leopard's. The leopard's physical constitution seemed to be even weaker than the average person's — what exactly was the reason for this?

It should be known that in the current Federation, even for those with the most average constitution, if they received gene agent of grade C and above, they would be able to fight for at worst half an hour using normal standard mecha in an intense battle. However, from start till now, the leopard had only been fighting for at most 10 minutes or so...

Furthermore, the leopard was only piloting an advanced mecha at present. The feedback force of standard mecha of advanced level and below (this included advanced mecha) had very little impact on a trained operator's body. It was not like with a mecha of special-class and above — because of the introduction of an operator's unique combat style, the feedback force would fluctuate depending on the power of the combat mode... this was why the higher the level of a mecha operator, the greater the demand upon the operator's physical constitution.

If they did not resolve this issue, even if the leopard possessed the control prowess of an ace operator, he would still be unable to pilot an ace mecha... considering this possibility, the furrow in Ling Lan's brow deepened.

Right then, in his cockpit, Li Lanfeng was already drenched in sweat. His body was soaked as if he had just stepped out of a bath. As the cockpit had the function of automatically regulating the humidity and temperature within the cockpit, even as Li Lanfeng sweated, his sweat was evaporating, causing the entire cockpit to become muggy with steam. He was panting heavily, his mind and spirit beginning to tire. Not just that, even his body was becoming weak and fatigued. The last few minutes of high-intensity operation and combat had drained his stamina rapidly, even exceeding his initial expectations.

"Damm*t!" Li Lanfeng could not help but curse. Having fought till this extent, he really

did not want to lose now due to a lack of stamina. He was never more resentful of this broken body of his. If he had the choice, he definitely would not have chosen to be a spectre. He would rather have possessed a healthy body and become an exceptional mecha operator. That way, he could have become a free warrior, forever standing by the rabbit's side to follow him and protect him...

"Is this the end?" Li Lanfeng began to feel his hands losing control. There were several moves he tried to execute, but his fingers just would not listen to him any longer and had gone on strike. He reflexively looked towards the bottom of his screen. In a window there, a mecha was silently watching his fight right now.

Li Lanfeng knew that that was the mecha being piloted by the rabbit. The outer appearance of the mecha was so familiar that he could recite all its inner components and equipment and all the applicable accessories for it. This was because that mecha was one of the ace mecha types he desired the most — the <King of Close Combat>! Who would have expected his rabbit to already be at this level...

A trace of bitterness coursed through Li Lanfeng's heart. It made sense when he thought about it though. Seven years time... with the rabbit's unique heaven-given talent in mecha piloting, how could the other just be as he appeared in Mecha World, just a low-level intermediate mecha warrior?

"The rabbit is getting further and further away from me..." Li Lanfeng was suddenly and fiercely crestfallen. Did he really have the right to stand by the rabbit's side? Perhaps this was all just a fanciful fantasy of his, perhaps he was just indulging in daydreams, when in fact, he was not at all worthy...

Just as Li Lanfeng was about to despair and give up, the rabbit's cool voice suddenly rang out from his mecha's commlink. "Don't lose to yourself."

Don't lose to yourself... this phrase reverberated like thunder in Li Lanfeng's ears. He was transported back to when he and the rabbit had first met — back then, they had been training every day in their dry and boring basic control drills, forever running, dodging, flying... even the most tenacious person would have times when they would falter and become frustrated. Even someone as calm as the rabbit had at times descended into an irritable funk, and at those times, the rabbit would let out a great roar, "Damm*t, don't lose to yourself, you weakling!"

After that, the rabbit would train even harder to carry out those basic drills, and he in

turn would be inspired by the rabbit's actions to persevere, continuing to train alongside the rabbit. Perhaps that phrase was what the rabbit used to motivate himself, but Li Lanfeng took those words as a warning from the rabbit for him. Over these past few years, whenever he found himself restless and impatient and about to give up, this phrase would naturally come to the forefront of his mind. This phrase spurred him to continue pushing forwards, causing him to never dare give up no matter how difficult the situation was.

Seven years later, hearing this phrase straight from the rabbit's mouth once again, Li Lanfeng's heart pounded violently. Warmth surged across his body, and he felt the fatigue he had been shoving aside being chased away by this wave of warmth, his entire body filling up with energy...

"Yes, how can I lose to myself? If I myself admit defeat, what right do I have to speak of changing my destiny to stand proudly by the rabbit's side?" Li Lanfeng spurned his own weakness. His initially dazed eyes instantly became focused once more, and his slowed fingers picked up their pace once again, becoming even faster than before. In the end, they moved so quickly that they could not be seen clearly — only layer after layer of afterimages could be seen, like illusionary flowers slowly blooming.

The two mecha had been fighting on even ground, but from the moment Li Lanfeng considered giving up, Li Lanfeng's mecha had become passive in comparison, no longer putting up a good fight. Instead, he had slowly been pushed to a disadvantage, soon only able to defend on all sides without being able to return any attacks of his own.

Although Li Shiyu, Han Jiyun, and Lin Zhong-qing did not know why Li Lanfeng had flagged all of a sudden, becoming so flustered in battle, they could tell from the situation that Li Lanfeng was probably in trouble. Their hearts sank, and their initially rather ordered shooting also started to become rushed and disorganised.

The special-class mecha fighting against Li Lanfeng was an experienced mecha master. When he saw his opponent suddenly stop attacking, he quickly realised that the other might be running low on stamina. Although this situation was rather abrupt so he was somewhat unprepared, he trusted in his own judgment. He did not lose this chance to intensify his attacks.

Despite going fully on the defensive, after resisting against the special-class operator's frenzied attacks for over ten seconds, Li Lanfeng's mecha finally could not hold out

any longer. His entire mecha was shuddering from the opponent's attacks, looking as if it were on the verge of collapsing soon. Li Shiyu and the other two watching from the side-lines were anxious but could not think of any way to help Li Lanfeng in his predicament. They could only shoot desperately in an attempt to pull Li Lanfeng back from the brink of defeat...

"This ends here!" Under the opponent's frenzied attacks, Li Lanfeng's mecha finally exposed a fatal opening under duress. The special-class operator had been waiting for this moment — seeing the opening, a cruel sneer appeared on his lips. He raised his beam saber mercilessly and slashed down viciously at Li Lanfeng's mecha.

"Watch out!" The other team members could only cry out in warning. Meanwhile, Li Shiyu was so horrified that he could not help but close his eyes. He could not bear to see Li Lanfeng — a teammate, his friend, also a descendant from the same Li family — die here in front of his eyes...

"Bang!" Two beam sabers collided forcefully, sending countless sparks into the air. The initially flagging advanced mecha had managed to react swiftly in this most critical juncture. His speed had certainly exceeded his previous top speed by at least twofold — it was due to this that Li Lanfeng had managed to block that dangerous blow to save himself.

"That's amazing, Senior Lanfeng!" Qi Long and the others watching the fight instantly cheered in excitement at the sight.

Hearing everyone's cheers, Li Shiyu quickly opened his eyes. Seeing Li Lanfeng unharmed, he instantly let out a sigh of relief. For that split second earlier, Li Shiyu had truly been overcome by despair.

"Even if I run out of stamina and become unable to continue fighting, I must defeat the opponent. I will use facts to tell the rabbit that I, Li Lanfeng, am no weakling." Boundless fighting spirit blazed in Li Lanfeng's eyes — the hesitation and discouraged emotions he felt previously had disappeared. With a loud shout, he pushed his engines to their maximum power and charged right at the opponent with the intent to ram into the other...

"Goddamn*t," the opponent could not help but curse, seeing this reckless attack of Li Lanfeng's. At the same time, he controlled his mecha to dodge — he had no intentions of dying along with the enemy while he still held the upper hand.

If possible, he hoped to swiftly escape after successfully killing the other... he had not forgotten that there was still an ace mecha watching hungrily below; his team leader had died at the other's hand. Now, he only hoped that that close combat ace mecha did not have enough power to fly into the sky.

The special-class mecha's ideas were solid. He planned to evade Li Lanfeng's reckless charge and then counterattack, but he did not expect that after he chose to evade, all the advantage he held previously was gone in a flash.

Li Lanfeng watched as his opponent dodged and his eyes flashed with a cold glint. He revved his engines and changed directions abruptly, sticking close to the opponent mecha like a shadow — there was no sign of his previous stiff and mindless charge. With that, the special-class operator realised that he had been tricked. The other's fierce and seemingly mindless attack was just a feint — the other's true goal was to use it to regain the initiative in this battle.

In this manner, Li Lanfeng successfully stuck close to the special-class mecha and began to rain down blows with his beam saber on his opponent. Perhaps it was because his hand speed had increased via a breakthrough, pushing his mecha's attack pace much higher than his previous top speed — right then, the special-class mecha was taken off guard, flustered at the sudden change. All the special-class operator could see at that moment were the shadows of beam sabers, and he could only block and defend with all his might.

Although the special-class mecha was in a tough spot right then, he had a wealth of battle experience to fall back on. He knew that he was in great danger at the moment, so even as he dealt with the rain of attacks, he turned the power on his mecha's beam shield to the maximum setting. That way, even if he missed any of the opponent's attacks, the heightened defence value of the beam shield would still be able to easily withstand the attack.

With a loud 'bang', the special-class operator felt a tremendous force strike his cockpit. The resulting violent vibrations felt like a boulder crushing his chest, and the operator's vision turned black as a surge of blood rose from the back of his throat...

With an audible cry, the special-class operator threw up the blood in his mouth forcefully, staining the control panel before him red.

Chapter 377

Ling Lan's Choice!

But it was precisely because he threw up this mouthful of blood that the special-class operator's mind began to clear. When he was fully aware again, his first response was to retreat swiftly in an attempt to escape the other's attack range. Until now, he had not figured out how that attack had come about. This was definitely not something a regular beam saber attack could do.

The special-class operator was truly blind because he was in the thick of it all; in contrast, the members of Ling Lan's team who were watching from the side-lines could see clearly. While the special-class operator had had his full attention on defending against Li Lanfeng's beam saber, Li Lanfeng had surprised the other by executing a knee strike with his mecha. The knee had struck the special-class mecha's cockpit with the powerful force of a mecha behind it.

If not for the gap in the mecha levels, as well as for the special-class mecha's beam shield neutralizing a large part of the force, the special-class operator would not have just ended up throwing up a mouthful of blood. He would probably have been gravely injured already. However, the attack had landed on a vital point of the mecha, with the cockpit directly receiving the brunt of the attack. Even though a special-class mecha's defenses were several times stronger than that of a regular mecha, this great force and the resulting intense vibrations had still inflicted some internal injury on that special-class operator.

The special-class operator desperately wanted to pull away and recover from his current passive situation, but having gained the advantage, how could Li Lanfeng let the other side succeed? With rekindled confidence, Li Lanfeng went all out into the fight. Even if this advanced mecha he was piloting broke down due to overload, he would still make sure that this special-class mecha before him was struck down.

In order to accomplish this objective, when Li Lanfeng saw the opponent retreat quickly, he too pushed all his engines to their maximum capacity to keep up with the opponent. With regards to mecha piloting, this type of behaviour was absolutely forbidden. Pushing the engines to maximum power meant that the mecha was being

overburdened. Running on overcapacity, even the most advanced mecha would only be able to sustain itself for a short three to four minutes. Once its limits were exceeded, the mecha would inevitably be damaged. The longer the mecha operated on overload, the greater the extent of the damage, until the point where the mecha might break down completely during combat...

However, to pilot a mecha till it was overloaded was not such a simple thing. If one's hand speed could not keep up, even if an operator wanted to operate on overcapacity, it would merely be wishful thinking. In the past, Li Lanfeng could barely raise all the power aspects of his mecha to their full 100% value. But this time, due to the life-or-death situation, he had broken through his own limits, which included the limits on his hand speed. Therefore, at this moment, he had truly unleashed 120% of the mecha's capacity, which was theoretically the greatest overload value achievable.

Sure enough, under Li Lanfeng's full-force operation, despite the level gap between the two mecha, Li Lanfeng managed to compensate for it by running his mecha in overcapacity.

And so, two mecha could be seen to fly at extreme speeds in the air, not much distance at all between them. One mecha was desperately backing away, while the other was hot on its tail.

Not only that, even while he pursued the opponent, Li Lanfeng did not forget to swing his beam saber wildly to attack. Li Lanfeng did not know how long this sudden surge of energy would last, but he knew that once it ran out, he would no longer have any more stamina to continue operating the mecha to fight...

"Your leopard is an absolute maniac." Little Four finally could not help but exclaim. The other was already obviously out of strength, but relying purely on willpower and an unwillingness to lose, he was holding out, and his offensive power seemed even stronger than before.

"Hn, I never expected that he would actually have the same berserk air like Qi Long." Qi Long was a battle maniac — as soon as he entered combat, he was very easily stoked into a manic state of excitement. Endless energy would surge up from within his body in that mode — even Ling Lan would have to expend a great deal of stamina to defeat Qi Long. She had initially thought that Qi Long was the only oddball in this regard, but now, seeing Li Lanfeng's unstoppable courage in pushing forwards, that dogged desire to finish things, he really seemed to display some signs of Qi Long in his berserk

mode...

Ling Lan could not help but shake her head in silence. What was up with these people she had taken in? The leopard had clearly looked like a gentle and graceful, mild-mannered and cultured person — who would have guessed that he would have a crazed zeal for battle no weaker than Qi Long's? Just imagining the future when she might end up leading a group who would turn into battle-crazed maniacs the moment they began fighting, Ling Lan felt her temples twitch violently...

Ling Lan very quickly threw this image aside — let her cross that bridge when she came to it. It had to be said that, at times, Ling Lan truly embodied the Ah-Q mentality.

However, Ling Lan soon thought of the leopard's physique which was weaker than the average person's and her joyful spirits sank. If she could not solve this problem, no matter how good the leopard's control skills were, he would still be unable to operate an ace mecha. Ling Lan was well aware that the feedback force an ace mecha plied upon an operator's body was absolutely not something the leopard could withstand in his current state.

Perhaps Little Four had used the term 'your leopard' too many times — under the subtle influence of repetition, Ling Lan had unconsciously begun calling Li Lanfeng her leopard as well, completely forgetting to correct Little Four's wrong phrasing...

It had to be said that habit was a scary thing. It could make others accept things naturally, without questioning it. By the time one noticed, the habit would have already been ingrained, and there would no longer be any way to resist or discard it...

While Ling Lan was worrying about Li Lanfeng's physical constitution, in the aerial battlefield, the special-class operator had already pushed his mecha's engines to their maximum value, but he was still unable to get away from the other's pursuit. Moreover, as he was fully focused on trying to get away, in a moment of distraction, the special-class operator was actually struck forcefully several times by Li Lanfeng's wild attacks.

The power of the mecha's beam shield was being drained at a rapid rate as it fought off the opponent's attacks — when it looked like the mecha's remaining power would not be sufficient to maintain the maximum defence value of the beam shield any longer, the special-class operator knew that he had been forced into a corner and had no choice but to fight back soon. Otherwise, he would end up crashing when the

opponent's attacks whittled away all of his mecha's power. At that time, his only outcome would be death.

"Argh!" The special-class operator unleashed an angry roar; this dire situation gave him no choice but to fight for his life. He decisively stopped trying to escape — gripping his beam saber tightly with both hands, he aimed accurately for the opponent's incoming beam saber and swung his own blade out to meet it.

The two beam sabers met with a loud bang. Perhaps both parties had used the full force of their mecha behind their blows, for the massive force of the collision caused the two beam sabers to present signs of distortion in that instant, and energy sparks were sent flying in all directions. In this patch of night sky, those sparks were like radiant fireworks, lighting up the night sky instantly.

Before the flares could dissipate, another loud 'bang' rang out once more. This sound was several times louder and crisper than the sound of the beam sabers clashing previously — the two mecha had slammed into each other at this time.

Even Li Shiyu's group of three who had been chasing after the two fighting mecha could feel the violent shockwaves from the collision of the two mecha. It was clear to see how strong the impact of the collision was.

The two fighting mecha were locked for several seconds and then they leapt back to instantly pull more than 30 metres apart. This was the inevitable outcome of inertia from the collision. The special-class mecha which already had a great deal of its power exhausted by its beam shield had become entirely dull after this collision. However, the condition of Li Lanfeng's mecha was not much better. His beam shield had been amped up to its maximum defence value as well during the collision. And even though the defence value of his beam shield had not been drained before the impact, due to the gap between their mecha levels, this one violent collision had been enough to completely exhaust the power of Li Lanfeng's mecha's beam shield. Li Lanfeng's mecha was similarly dark and dull.

Having been flung back, the special-class operator relied on his solid control skills to stabilise his mecha. When he saw the opponent's mecha also lose the protection of its beam shield, he was ecstatic. He knew that this was his chance! So, he decisively raised the beam saber in his hands and piloted his mecha to charge manically at the off-balance advanced mecha, shouting, "Go to hell!"

Seeing this, Ling Lan's expression shifted. She decisively drew a beam handgun from the back of her waist and aimed right for that special-class mecha leaping at Li Lanfeng.

Although Ling Lan was piloting a close combat ace mecha, this did not mean that her mecha was not equipped with any long-range weapons. That said, the long-range weapons of a close combat mecha were neither those specialised long beam guns nor the even longer range beam sniper rifles long-range attack mecha had; rather, close combat mecha were equipped with beam handguns which had relatively shorter range. Still, a short-range beam handgun was enough to cover the distance between her and that special-class mecha right now.

Although Ling Lan could be said to favour close combat, her long-range shooting skills were equally good. She might not match up to the level of those aberrant marksmanship prodigies who were masters of long-range attacks, but Ling Lan was still a shade better than the average shooter.

However, right when Ling Lan was about to shoot, her gaze flashed and her trigger finger froze. Highly familiar with close combat techniques, she had noticed that Li Lanfeng's seemingly off-balance mecha had actually shifted into a very familiar motion — his mecha's left hand was reaching slightly forward while the entire mecha seemed to be leaning to one side...

Empty-Handed Weapon Grab ¹ ! Of course, the stance Li Lanfeng was using was a modified version, but the discerning eyes of Ling Lan could still see the underlying true form. No matter how much he had changed the stance, its origins were unchanged. It looked like Li Lanfeng was prepared to make his final move.

At this sight, Ling Lan actually had two options. One was to proceed and shoot anyway — a mecha without the protection of a beam shield would require only three consecutive beam shots to eliminate. If those three shots hit, she would certainly be able to penetrate the special-class mecha's cockpit and end this fight instantly. The other option was to trust that the leopard would be able to finish his final attack, though in Ling Lan's opinion, the probability of the leopard succeeding was at most only 60%...

If this were still the Ling Lan of the previous world, she would definitely have chosen to proceed and shoot. She definitely would not have taken the gamble — her mother hen personality made it a habit for her to gather up the people she treasured under

her wings for protection. But in this new life, having gone through the various insane torments and trials of the learning space, Ling Lan had learned to be cold and ruthless, unfeeling and decisive. These two conflicting notions spun through Ling Lan's mind, and then she decisively chose the second option. As long as there was more than half the probability, Ling Lan would dare to take the risk. She believed that if the leopard succeeded, he would once again grow even stronger and get even closer to becoming an ace operator.

Even though Li Lanfeng's life would be threatened, cold rationality told Ling Lan that, for the sake of the other's future, this bit of risk was still worth it...

Chapter 378

The Attribution of Victory!

Ling Lan's decision was made in a split second, and then the special-class mecha's beam saber was striking out in a savage stab at Li Lanfeng's cockpit. Every mecha operator knew that once an opponent's cockpit was destroyed, it would mean the end of a battle and the clinching of victory.

"Dodge!"

"Watch out!"

"Danger!"

Observing the fight, the other members of Ling Lan's team could only yell helplessly in fright. Qi Long and Luo Lang were not good at long-range attacks, so they could only stare helplessly from the ground below, unable to do anything to help.

As they both favoured close combat, their skills and techniques were largely intended for close combat — they had not paid much attention to long-range attack skills. Right now, they finally regretted their decision. They finally understood why Boss Lan had casually reminded them every so often not to neglect their long-range attack skills even if they wanted to focus on close combat...

It turned out that when a companion's life was in danger, every extra skill or technique might be the key to turning things around to save that companion... like now, if only they had some long-range attacks to rely on, they would have long started shooting frenziedly to help Li Lanfeng against the enemy.

Li Shiyu, Han Jijyun, and Lin Zhong-qing too felt their helplessness keenly at this time. If only their mecha control skills were slightly better, they would not have been left so far behind. Furthermore, they also felt that there was something wrong with their teamwork. For example, when they had begun chasing after Li Lanfeng, they had not thought to spread themselves out. Now, all bunched up together, they found that their shooting trajectories were blocked by Li Lanfeng...

In other words, even though they had the ability to shoot, they still did not dare to shoot now. This was because they just could not guarantee that they would not hit Li Lanfeng, who was closer to them, first before they could even hit the special-class mecha.

Everyone could only stare with wide eyes as the enemy's beam saber pierced towards Li Lanfeng's cockpit...

"Swoosh!" This was the sound of a beam saber piercing through a mecha. Li Shiyu's group of three following behind Li Lanfeng saw a beam saber suddenly appearing at his back through his body. They all felt despair creep over them — had that mild-mannered, forever smiling nice guy lost his wings here?

Only Ling Lan, who had been observing the fight from the ground below, calmly lowered the raised right hand of her mecha, unhurriedly controlling the mecha to holster her beam handgun back at her waist.

Ling Lan had just finished this motion when the two stationary mecha in the air suddenly moved. Li Lanfeng's mecha abruptly raised a leg and slammed a powerful kick at the special-class mecha sticking closely to him.

The special-class mecha was sent flying backwards by Li Lanfeng's kick, back arching to face the skies, but it still made no motion to resist. Those with sharp eyes could see that a sword hilt-like object was protruding from his cockpit, and at the back of the mecha's waist, an indistinct light was flickering...

The special-class mecha soaring through the air was not moving; under the influence of planet Newline's gravity, the entire mecha began to plunge towards the ground. Right at that moment, that hilt-like protrusion on his cockpit suddenly dropped off, and the flickering light at the back of his waist was snuffed out at the same time.

Without the hilt-like object in the way, a dark round hole was revealed in the mecha's cockpit, tunnelling right through to the other side...

A loud 'boom' rang out as the special-class mecha crashed heavily into the ground, sending clouds of dust and dirt into the air. Perhaps because the special-class mecha's construction was extremely solid, it still remained in one piece after the impact.

At this time, the watching crowd finally realised that the winner of this fight was actually their companion Li Lanfeng and not the enemy special-class mecha as they

had thought.

Li Shiyu's group of three, which had been hurrying desperately after Li Lanfeng, unwilling to give up hope, were instantly overwhelmed with joy at the outcome. They were just about to fly over to congratulate Li Lanfeng, the clear victor of the battle, when Li Lanfeng, who had been proudly hovering in the air, suddenly lost control of his mecha, which immediately began to plummet.

This unexpected development took the ecstatic team members by surprise. Their expressions changed drastically once more as they leapt forwards in unplanned unison... the ones in the air hoped to halt the falling mecha, while the ones on the ground hoped to catch the mecha before it could hit the ground...

Still, it was undeniable that, being so far away, it was almost impossible for them to accomplish their objectives. Even so, they did not give up, still pushing their engines to their limits...

Mentally prepared, Ling Lan's mecha had flickered right at the moment Li Lanfeng had lost control of his mecha, disappearing from its original position... the next second, she had appeared right below Li Lanfeng. With a great leap, her mecha flew over 10 metres into the air, just in time to catch Li Lanfeng's mecha by the waist...

When the other members of Ling Lan's team saw this scene, their hearts relaxed. They had actually forgotten that there was still Boss Lan standing guard below. Everyone slowed their mecha to a stop.

Only Little Four was driven up the wall by the sight. What the hell was this?! A hero rescuing a damsel in distress? A damsel rescuing a hero in distress? Or was it a hero saving another hero in distress? Or should it be a damsel rescuing another damsel... aaaaaaah, his core chip was quickly being overloaded by this incomputable question!

Little Four suddenly froze, internal systems hanging, his entire body going slack, gaze blank. However, he reflexively saved a copy of this image, storing it directly in his databank. When his core chip resumed normal functioning later, he would continue processing this question.

"Leopard, how do you feel?" Ling Lan efficiently hugged Li Lanfeng's mecha close as she controlled her mecha into landing softly with almost no tremors at all. Feet securely on the ground, she quickly connected to Li Lanfeng's commlink and asked

worriedly.

Even though Ling Lan's tone of voice was as icy as ever, Li Lanfeng could still hear the deep well of concern concealed within it.

Li Lanfeng could not help but smile happily, warmth spreading through his heart. His rabbit truly cared a lot for him, otherwise he would not have rushed so quickly over to save him before he could hit the ground...

Due to the fierce battle, the metal half-mask concealing Li Lanfeng's upper face all this time had already slipped off. If someone had been able to see the radiant, heartfelt smile on his face right now, and if their resistance was a little low, they would have found their hearts captivated, regardless of whether they were male or female.

"I'm fine!" replied Li Lanfeng, smiling. His eyes felt a little hot, and he raised his hands to wipe away the sweat flowing down into his eyes. Even such a simple movement was very difficult for Li Lanfeng right now — he felt as if his two arms no longer belonged to him.

"Your mecha has no more power to fight." Ling Lan swiftly examined Li Lanfeng's mecha; the grey and dull outer shell of the mecha made her frown. In this kind of dangerous battlefield, it was very dangerous without the protection of a mecha... Ling Lan instantly made her decision. "Later, come sit inside my mecha."

"Ah, oh, okay!" Ling Lan's words startled Li Lanfeng, but he quickly caught himself and answered ecstatically. Did this prove that his performance this time had gained the rabbit's approval? At this thought, Li Lanfeng's entire being thrummed with excitement. His body, initially so tired that he could not even lift a finger, seemed to be infused with a second wind.

He picked up the metal mask and placed it back on his face. When Ling Lan placed his mecha onto the ground, he opened the hatch of the cockpit and climbed out laboriously. Of course, his movements now were not as neat as usual, perhaps even appearing rather awkward, because he had half-crawled half-stumbled out of his cockpit.

He then climbed up from the ground and inched step by step to the feet of Ling Lan's mecha. This would have been an extremely simple set of movements under usual circumstances, but now, Li Lanfeng only managed it via a Herculean effort.

Li Lanfeng had just arrived at the feet of Ling Lan's mecha when the boarding platform of the mecha settled onto the ground almost at the same time. Li Lanfeng smiled wryly — it looked like the rabbit was well aware of his current condition, able to estimate his arrival time so precisely. Although Li Lanfeng was somewhat frustrated and embarrassed by this, his joy and gratefulness quickly chased those complicated emotions away... he took in a deep breath and then stepped firmly onto the platform.

The platform rose slowly, and before it even arrived at the cockpit, Li Lanfeng could already see Ling Lan standing outside the cockpit, stretching a hand out towards him...

The corners of Li Lanfeng's lips quirked and he placed his hand firmly into Ling Lan's hand. Ling Lan's fingers were rather cold, but his palm was very warm. This warmth made Li Lanfeng's heart thump and settle — so, it felt this safe being held tightly by someone one trusted...

Just as Li Lanfeng was wrestling with his emotions, a powerful tug came from Ling Lan's hand. The next second, his entire body had been pulled by the other into the cockpit and thrown into the auxiliary seat...

"Sit tight!" ordered Ling Lan. Her cool gaze swept over Li Lanfeng, as if displeased at Li Lanfeng's dilly-dallying. This gaze made Li Lanfeng shiver, his mind jolting to clarity in an instant. Those pointless musings in his heart were completely swept away. He did not dare to delay any further, hurriedly buckling himself into the auxiliary seat with the seatbelt.

Boo hoo hoo, he really did not want the rabbit to think of him as a burden !!! ¹ Somewhat jittery, Li Lanfeng could feel none of his body's pain or discomfort. He was obviously much more agile when buckling himself in. Sure enough, when one's attention was diverted, there would be a painkilling effect.

Seeing Li Lanfeng's quickened motions, Ling Lan closed the cockpit, satisfied, and activated her mecha. She had really been rather annoyed looking at the leopard's slow movements earlier; she truly was an impatient person... it looked like she really needed to think of a plan to help the leopard solve the problem of his physical constitution completely soon, thought Ling Lan.

As there were no other enemies around, Ling Lan did not ask Little Four to employ emergency activation, choosing to activate the mecha normally. Two minutes later, the mecha's regular activation was completed.

This was already Little Four delaying things as much as he could bear. Otherwise, for the A.I. that had been optimized by Little Four, even regular activation would definitely be completed within one minute. However, this speed would have been much too shocking and suspicious. Even an imperial mecha could not complete regular activation within one minute. Although Ling Lan trusted the leopard, the existence of Little Four was just too bizarre to explain. So, in order to avoid trouble and also to protect Little Four, Ling Lan still chose to cover things up a little.

Chapter 379

The Truth is Revealed!

Having activated her mecha, Ling Lan very quickly contacted the rest of the team and made the subsequent arrangements. Ling Lan felt that continuing to remain here was much too dangerous. After all, two batches of enemies had fallen here — if another batch of enemies came, they definitely would not be just one lone ace mecha squad anymore. It was very likely that two, or even three or more, ace mecha squads would arrive.

Ling Lan had the confidence to go up against one ace operator, but Ling Lan was unsure whether she could take an additional ace. Moreover, she was also not the only one here now — there were still the other members of her team to account for. Ling Lan needed to take responsibility for her team members' safety. After careful consideration, Ling Lan decided to retreat with her team and avoid the keenest edge of danger for the moment!

Meanwhile, at that moment, in the central command centre of the starship fleet in space, two battlefield reports had been delivered to the commander...

"You're saying that there have been reports from both locations that Qiao Ting has appeared?" The commander looked at the two locations on the map which were over ten kilometres apart and could not help but frown.

"Yes, Commander. On one end is news sent by team-M — preliminary estimation is that the elite ace Tang Yu is bringing Qiao Ting along with him. It's only the two of them, and at present, it has been confirmed that one of the mecha is an ace trainee mecha of the military academy... meanwhile, the other report came from the dormitory district. Our mecha troops there have discovered a batch of military academy trainee mecha among the ground forces. A majority of those trainee mecha are special-class mecha, with just one of them being an ace mecha..." The adjutant had pored over the information in detail the moment he had received the reports. Upon the commander's questioning, he quickly spoke up to explain.

"Actually having two ace trainee mecha appear at the same time... could it be that two ace operators have emerged within the First Men's Military Academy?" The

commander-in-chief stared at the two reports, his forehead scrunched up even tighter.

"Unclear. The Huaxians have always been wily. This could just be a smokescreen, a ploy by the instructors, or there really could be two students who have managed to advance and the school had intentionally suppressed this information." The adjutant shared his speculations with the commander.

"It looks like we can't pass on either of these two points. Regardless whether it is true or false, these trainee mecha need to be completely wiped out." A cold glint flashed through the commander's eyes; he had not forgotten the ultimate goal of this operation.

"That location of team-M, since there are two people, send two ace mecha squads over..." The commander first gave this order.

Thinking of something, the adjutant quickly notified commander, "Sir, before I reported to you, I had already sent an ace mecha team over."

"So what's the current situation?" asked the commander with a raised brow.

The adjutant's expression was unsightly. "We still have not received any confirmed updates."

"How long has it been since the team was deployed?" The commander's face turned grim.

"It's already been 10 minutes." The adjutant too felt that things were not looking good for there to be no news after so long.

"It looks like they've probably met a bad end at that spot..." the commander's eyes flashed. "It is very likely to be a trap... but even if it's a trap, I still want this trap to become a conquest of ours. Send two more ace mecha squads to that location. We must completely eradicate the people lying in ambush there."

"Yes, Commander!" the adjutant replied immediately.

After issuing this order, the commander walked over to the battle map display, and the adjutant quickly hurried after him.

The commander peered intently at those spots marking the areas where the battle

was most intense, and after a thoughtful pause he said, "The dormitory district... is the area with the greatest resistance. The bulk of our forces as well as the forces of our allies are caught up here... Adjutant Gare, is the battle still deadlocked?"

"Yes, Commander. The defending troops of planet Newline have already figured out our objective. They have placed all their martial forces at the dormitory district. Our previous few batches of mecha warriors suffered major casualties because the other side was ready for us. We've lost many people and are currently disadvantaged in terms of numbers. Although we've tried forcing our way through many times, the other side has been able to resist tenaciously." The adjutant reported the situation at the dormitory district to the commander.

The commander-in-chief once again picked up the reports the staff officer had brought him earlier and his brow scrunched up once more. "The ground artillery is too dense and our landing points are too concentrated... can't we disperse our landing points further away?"

The adjutant chuckled wryly and said, "The only safe landing point on planet Newline is this spot at the First Men's Military Academy. The other undeveloped primal areas are all classified as treacherous terrain. This was specially highlighted during our briefing with the intelligence bureau. Our landing points must not exceed the range of the First Men's Military Academy at all costs. Otherwise, the lives of our warriors will be in danger..."

Before the commander could say anything, the adjutant added, "The facts prove that the information given to us by the intelligence bureau is accurate. One of our allied mecha squads made an impromptu alteration to their landing point to avoid the dense cannonfire, going beyond the safe areas we had marked out... those people are still MIA ¹ now. After repeated consideration and deduction, the final conclusion we arrived at is that the entire team was annihilated..."

The adjutant's words made the commander's facial expression change; the adjutant's expression had twisted as well as he said all this. He paused for a beat and then continued, "Just now, I have carefully studied the briefing file sent by the intelligence bureau again and found that those areas are all forbidden grounds. They are left there by the Huaxians for operators of ace level and above to attempt a breakthrough."

The commander-in-chief's gaze narrowed in interest. "So the Huaxians have found such a great spot! No wonder they would often produce top-class operators after a

stretch of time. Moreover, with these forbidden grounds protecting the planet, with only the First Men's Military Academy situated here, this is a great way of saving labour and resources while providing peace of mind."

With regards to the Huaxians' great luck, the commander-in-chief was truly filled with envy-jealousy-hate! After a few seconds of silent contemplation, he finally made a decision. "Adjutant Gare, notify those below. Mobilize the ultimate tool."

The adjutant raised his head, gaping with disbelief. The ultimate tool was something that was only allowed to be mobilised when the fleet was facing total annihilation. He did not expect the commander-in-chief to violate this principle, actually ordering its mobilization while they were still attacking. If news of this ever leaked to the outside world, the commander-in-chief would definitely receive censure from all sides, and may even be court-martialled.

"Time is of the essence. Do not forget what our primary objective is." The commander-in-chief was not at all surprised by his adjutant's reaction. If possible, he too did not want to mobilise this ultimate plan. However, the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry ² — the sneak attack they had thought foolproof ended up being discovered by the ground forces of the enemy, resulting in mass casualties on their end, pushing the entire battle into a deadlock.

The commander-in-chief knew very well that the longer the battle dragged on, the more disadvantageous it would become for them. At present, their satellite signal jamming technology could only hold out for four hours. As soon as the interference ended, they would be facing enemy reinforcements on all sides...

In the surrounding star space, the commander-in-chief knew that there were four large Huaxian fleets prowling about. They were only able to cause trouble here for so long because the fleets did not know that planet Newline had been invaded. Once the interference time ended, the ground forces would be able to connect to their satellites again and transmit a distress signal. Those four fleets would definitely rush here at top speed to provide assistance. At that time, they would have to pay a heavy toll to escape, having no choice but to cut a bloody path through the enemies. And this was something the commander did not wish to see.

"Also, I've found out that those allied forces outside have already begun to distrust us." A trace of frustration flashed through the commander-in-chief's eyes. "In order to salvage the situation and appease them, we need to do something impactful to let

them know that everything is still within our control!" Besides, he was not at all planning to return fruitless. He was a staunch champion of the hegemony of the Empire... even if he would be court-martialled, he still wanted to complete this mission for the empire.

The adjutant became very serious in reaction to the commander-in-chief's words. He too knew that those words spoken by the allied forces outside were indeed not very pleasing to the ear, some seeming to even suspect that the empire was purposefully using the allied troops as sacrificial pawns. The commander-in-chief had chosen this drastic step in large part to shake off this bad name.

Coming to terms with the commander's decision, the adjutant quickly stood to attention and accepted the order. "Yes, Sir! I'll immediately notify those below!"

The commander-in-chief waved a hand, gaze shadowed as he looked down at the verdant planet below. He had already revealed all his cards — he hoped that this time things would turn out to his satisfaction.

Subsequently, order after order was sent out from the command centre. Countless starships once again deployed countless mecha troops — among them was the secret weapon which the commander-in-chief had called the ultimate tool...

In the command centre of the ground forces, when the commander there received reports of more enemy mecha descending from space, his expression changed drastically, "Issue the command. Hold on no matter what." He tore his army cap from his head in a pique. The back of his crisp-pressed military uniform was already soaked with sweat — it was clear to see that the strategic planning over this period of time had already wrung him out mentally.

"Are we still unable to contact the fleets at the other sectors?" Watching his orders being conveyed one by one down the line by the adjutant staff officer by his side, he could not help but look towards the soldier in charge of communications who had not stopped trying to establish contact with the other fleets.

"We can't send any signals out. We can only passively receive signals from the satellite." The comms soldier was in a similar state as the commander. The anxiety and stress over this period of time had also caused his uniform to be soaked through with sweat.

"It looks like the other is using a signal jammer. The only lucky thing is that they only managed to jam outgoing signals and not shut us down completely." The commander had actually come to this conclusion a long time ago, but he had just been holding on to that last bit of hope, unwilling to resign himself to the situation. At the thought of the opponent's jamming technology being just that bit stronger... the already sweat-soaked military uniform was saturated even more with a new torrent of sweat from the resulting fear. The commander was well aware that if that had been the case, they would certainly be deader than dead right now, to say nothing of putting up any resistance and counterattacking.

"Commander, the latest news from the frontlines say that this batch of mecha are mostly ace mecha and special-class mecha." Without waiting for the commander to finish being thankful, the news his subordinate brought made the commander's heart sink.

The commander knew very well that they had only been able to hold out for so long because the first few batches of enemy mecha invading from the skies were largely intermediate mecha and advanced mecha, with only the rare few ace mecha scattered among them...

"It looks like the enemy has pulled out all the stops now." The commander clenched his teeth and ordered, "Let the special-class mecha task force holding the fort — all the mecha of special-class and above — engage the enemy in battle."

He had way too few ace operators on hand... now, he could only rely on special-class operators to use their lives to fend off the enemy. Hopefully, they would not have to wait till all their forces were wiped out for the reinforcements to arrive. A glimmer of pain passed through the commander's eyes. In order to protect those students behind them, he had no choice but to make this painful decision.

Chapter 380

Break Apart!

As Tang Yu's group, which had been providing support to the frontlines from the back via long-range attacks all this while, consisted of either ace or special-class mecha, they received news of the new batch of incoming enemy mecha a step earlier than the other regular mecha.

Tang Yu swiftly locked onto an enemy mecha and zoomed in onto its image on his screens. When he saw the familiar outer forms of the mecha, Tang Yu's face paled involuntarily. He then quickly chose another few mecha from the incoming enemy team at random, zooming in on them in succession, and found that a majority of these enemy mecha were ace mecha and special-class mecha, at a ratio of 1 ace to 4 special-class mecha... their numbers were as high as 500 mecha!

Tang Yu knew that this was likely the enemy's last resort, a signal that the final showdown of this battle was about to begin!

"Instructors of the academy at special-class operator status and above, draw in towards my location immediately..." As the instructor with the highest military rank, Tang Yu was decisive, instantly connecting to the internal commlink of the military academy instructors to issue this order.

The instructors, who had initially been scattered around the campus, heard Tang Yu's command and quickly stopped shooting, operating their mecha in Tang Yu's direction. In less than a minute, these experienced instructors had all assembled by Tang Yu's side.

Tang Yu shared the news he had received with all the instructors, splitting the instructors into several teams at the same time. He also told them that as soon as these enemy mecha entered the lower air range of planet Newline, they needed to surge forth and meet the enemy.

On the ground, the ones defending the dormitory district were all the armoured ground forces of the Federation. As soon as the flames of battle spread out to scorch the ground, the first ones to suffer would be these warriors. This was why Tang Yu had

decided to bring the battlefield into the air. Moreover, the dormitory district was right behind the armoured forces — inside were all those defenceless academy cadets. For the sake of the students' safety, Tang Yu would not allow a mecha fight to break out there.

All the instructors knew that this was an extremely unfavourable battle for them, because the number of ace operators among the ground forces defending planet Newline was just too low. Even if they counted themselves in as well, their numbers were still a tad weaker than that of the invading enemy.

Right at this moment, Qiao Ting, who had also rushed over and was now aware of the situation, asked anxiously, "Instructor Tang Yu, what should we do?"

"Continue to work with the ground forces and provide long-range assistance!" Tang Yu did not dare to let Qiao Ting fight with them — once they went up against the enemy crowd of ace mecha, even he would not be able to guarantee his own safety, much less Qiao Ting's. For the students' safety, he felt that it would be better to keep them behind the lines of the ground forces.

Tang Yu's order was not received well by Qiao Ting. He was an ace operator himself! He should be a bit stronger than the instructors who were still special-class operators, right? If they could fight, then why couldn't he go too? He was about to argue his case when Tang Yu barked, "Qiao Ting, obey my orders!"

Familiar with Tang Yu's character, Qiao Ting knew that Tang Yu had already made up his mind not to let him onto the battlefield. Continuing to plead was pointless, so he gritted his teeth and said sulkily, "Roger that, Instructor Tang Yu!"

The enemy's descent was not fast but it was not slow either — five minutes later, the first of the enemies officially entered the lower airspace of the planet. Seeing this, Tang Yu ordered, "Attack!"

Command issued, Tang Yu was the first to charge into the fray. He revved his main engine and piloted his mecha to soar into the sky. Behind him, the instructors all swooped towards the descending enemies under his lead. Two batches of mecha — one from above, one from below — finally met in the air, 100 metres off the ground, and began their fight...

"Regiment Commander, what should we do now?" Seeing that Qiao Ting had not

followed his instructor's orders to retreat to the backline of the ground forces, still standing rooted in place, a member by his side could not help but ask.

"At this kind of dangerous moment, how can we hide behind our instructors?" said Qiao Ting, pumped up. "I want to fight! I want to protect our academy! Those who want to fight, follow me. Those who want to obey the instructors and stay here can stay. I will not force anyone!"

Qiao Ting's words caused his team members around him to fall silent. At this time, Qiao Ting's most loyal defender stood out once more in support to say, "The regiment commander is right. Now is the most critical moment for our military academy. How can we be cowards and hide behind the instructors? I will go with the regiment commander."

Seeing the other members continue to remain silent, his tone was scornful as he said, "Have you all forgotten the oath you swore before the military flag when you first entered the military academy? Those who don't even have the guts to protect their own academy are not worthy of piloting mecha!"

Many of the members were unable to accept this accusation; provoked, they all spoke up, "I'll go!" "Me too!" "And me!" Eleven members shouted in near unison.

In the end, there were only three left who still remained silent. Qiao Ting asked them coldly, "You all plan to stay behind?"

After another beat of silence, one of the three finally opened his mouth. "Instructor Tang Yu told us to stay here. I think we should listen to the instructor. The first lesson we learned was to obey orders from our superiors and not to act on our own impulses."

Qiao Ting's gaze narrowed at these words, his entire aura turning frigid. The other regiment members sensed something strange in the air; just as one of the other members were about to try and counsel those three, Qiao Ting said, "In that case, you three can stay here." That said, he turned and said to the twelve members who wanted to go with him and said, "The rest of you, follow me!"

As soon as he finished speaking, Qiao Ting was the first to pilot his mecha in a sprint towards the inner regions of the military academy. The twelve members dared not say anything, immediately controlling their mecha in pursuit. Very soon, Qiao Ting's group

of 13 had been swallowed by the night, leaving the range of the dormitory district.

The three people left behind watched as Qiao Ting's figure disappeared. The mecha who had responded to Qiao Ting suddenly slumped as tension bled out of its frame, almost losing his footing. The other two reflexively tugged on his arms to support him, thus preventing the other from falling down.

"Just now, I really thought the regiment commander would fly off the handle," said the unsteady member with a wry smile.

"Me too!" The two mecha supporting him had felt the same.

"I'm worried whether the regiment commander is just biding his time to deal with us later ¹?" asked one of the mecha worriedly.

"If we are all still alive then, definitely. The regiment commander will never let us go for defying him. However, if we are lucky enough to survive, I plan to quit Leiting." That member who had spoken up against Qiao Ting said determinedly.

His words shocked the other two mecha beside him. Mind you, once someone quit from Leiting, they would be viewed by the whole Leiting Mecha Clan as deserters. They would definitely find their every step constricted within the military academy.

"The exams that need to be taken have all been taken anyhow. At that time, I'll just request to be sent to some unexplored territory for practical training. By the time I return, it would already be time to enlist..." That person was not making this decision blindly. He had long prepared for this eventuality; this was also what had given him the courage to defy Qiao Ting's order.

"The regiment commander will go to the Third Division. This is already something that has been finalised. He's entering directly, exempt from being assessed. I heard this was approved personally by the Third Marshal," exclaimed another regiment member enviously. This was definitely a glorious matter. It was said that only General Ling Xiao had ever enjoyed such a distinction back in the past. Back then, it had been the Second Marshal, now the First Marshal, who had taken a shine to General Ling Xiao and personally appointed and approved his enlistment into his own army division without going through the regular assessments.

"You can't enlist with the Third Division anymore. You might not even be able to enlist with any of the divisions on friendly terms with the Third." Even as cadets, they knew

that the army divisions had their respective factions. Once Qiao Ting established himself in the Third Division, if they enlisted with any other divisions within the same faction, their lives would not be easy.

"I will enlist with the 23rd Division," declared that person with conviction. "I'm uncertain about the other divisions, but the 23rd Division, General Ling Xiao's division, will definitely have nothing to do with the Third Division. Besides, Boss Huo and his gang are also at the 23rd Division. Perhaps the regiment commander might become the second General Ling Xiao in future, a true elite among elites, but I still think following Boss Huo is a much more reassuring and secure decision."

Regiment Commander Qiao Ting was just too proud — once he had made a decision, he was not able to accept any advice or dissent from others. Even though this could be taken as the confidence a successful person needed to have, he felt that Qiao Ting was overconfident. This meant nothing good for the future development of the regiment commander, and this was also why he had used Instructor Tang Yu's orders as a legitimate excuse to refuse to follow Qiao Ting.

His words made the other two fall into silent contemplation. A few seconds later, one of them said with a wry smile, "Let me see for a while longer. After all, that's all things that haven't happened yet. Let's just focus on how to survive right now."

His words were extremely reasonable. The three of them no longer had any mood to chat. If they did not manage to survive this battle, all talk of the future was moot. Very soon, they had piloted their mecha back to the rear of the ground forces. They began to carry out their previous duty — shooting their beam guns from far away, helping to keep the enemies attacking the forces at the front at bay.

As they fought, the other member who had not uttered a peep all this while secretly connected to the commlink of the member who had said he wanted to enlist with the 23rd Division and said, "When you apply for enlistment with the 23rd Division, let me know."

Hearing this, the member who had argued back against Qiao Ting smiled. It looked like he was not the only one who saw the problem with Qiao Ting...

Right then, on Qiao Ting's end, he was swiftly leading his twelve members in a sprint away from the dormitory district. Qiao Ting was confident, but he also knew that they were surrounded by enemy mecha. For them inexperienced cadets to find a lucky

break in the chaos was impossible. If they wanted to make any impact with their combat power and have a fighting chance as cadets, they would need to get further away from the main battlefield.

Qiao Ting believed that there were sure to be scattered enemy mecha at the other areas of the military academy. And Qiao Ting's target was precisely these isolated enemy mecha — this was also why he wanted to bring his twelve members away for a change of battlefield.

Unknowingly, the mecha team Qiao Ting was leading and the mecha team Ling Lan was leading in retreat right at that moment were actually travelling on the same route. However, one was moving closer to the dormitory district in order to ensure their safety, while the other had chosen to distance themselves from the dormitory district in order to gain battle merits...

The battle continued to rage on, and seemed to be intensifying as the fighting progressed. Both the warriors of the Federation and the instructors of the academy were completely embroiled in the whirlwind of battle. Other than fighting, they could only fight and fight and fight some more. As long as they did not die, they continued to fight without stopping. No one could tell when this battle would end...

Chapter 381

General Ling!

From the time they had discovered the aerial invasion till now, two hours had elapsed unknowingly. The night was still very dark, and the enemy still had not been able to break through the defensive line of the ground forces. Meanwhile, the enemies who had just appeared had not made much impact due to the desperate resistance from all the special-class mecha of the Federation forces. The battle was once again mired in a deadlock.

The commander of the ground forces had grown numb in the face of wave after wave of casualty reports. He went from deep heartache to unfeeling numbness, because he himself had no idea whether he would share the same fate as many of these warriors, sacrificed in the battle on this planet...

"Look, what's that up above...?" A staff officer suddenly cried out in surprise. He was the one tasked with monitoring the battlefield, and right now, his eyes were riveted on the large screen on the wall of the command centre.

At this cry, the commander quickly raised his head from the mass of reports before him, and his eyes immediately noticed two radiant mecha almost bright enough to dazzle his eyes in the air above the dormitory district. That familiar form caused him to lose control and shout, "Godd*mmmit! They actually dare to violate the terms of the joint declaration!"

Right then, on the battlefield, almost everyone had noticed the two mecha hovering in the air. The mecha's outer forms were just too large and bright — it was practically impossible to miss them. It was like someone had hit the pause button on the initially fierce battlefield; both sides stopped fighting in unplanned unison.

Imperial mecha were forbidden from appearing in regular battlefields, but now two had inexplicably appeared in the airspace above planet Newline. They stood tall and proud as they looked down on the battlefield below.

When the enemy fighters saw the emblem on the chests of the two imperial mecha, they instantly emitted an earth-shattering cheer. In contrast, the defensive troops of

planet Newline, all of the Federation warriors including the academy instructors, were swamped by an emotion that felt a lot like despair.

Tang Yu had just destroyed an ace mecha when he heard the horrified gasps of the other instructors around him. And right after that, the entire battlefield descended into a kind of cold stillness. Bewildered, he lifted his head, and when he saw the two mecha hovering in the air, his pupils contracted, and his hands which had been busy operating his mecha stiffened...

Tang Yu reflexively shot a glance at the dormitory district — he could almost see what the final fate of the people remaining here would be already. He suddenly thought of something and swiftly checked the location of his pet disciple Qiao Ting. Unexpectedly, he found that the other had already departed the range of the dormitory district and was heading into the depths of the military academy.

Tang Yu could not help but feel both shocked and delighted. Shocked that Qiao Ting had not obeyed his orders, acting on his own to leave the protected area... if anything had happened, he would not have been able to rush over in time to help. Delighted because, even though Qiao Ting had disobeyed him, he had made a fortuitous mistake in leaving the dormitory district. Perhaps this way, he may have a chance of surviving.

Yes, Tang Yu did not believe that they would be able to survive the attacks of an imperial operator. It was foreseeable that anyone who remained in the dormitory district, whether it were soldiers or instructors, or even those students under the protection of the beam shield, would be unable to escape death in the end.

Having no other recourse, Tang Yu's gaze turned cold as he made an instant decision. He would lead all the instructors here and try their best to hold these two imperial mecha here as long as possible, giving Qiao Ting's group more time to run away.

The two imperial mecha saw that the entire battlefield had frozen for several seconds at their emergence, becoming deathly silent, and their hearts were filled with pride and satisfaction. They stared with cool disinterest down at the people below — the Huaxian ground forces and the ace operators in their ranks were like nothing more than ants in the imperial mecha's eyes.

At this moment, one of the imperial mecha asked the other tonelessly, "What have you found?"

"I see two batches of baby fish ¹ trying to meet up, hehe..." the other imperial mecha suddenly cackled.

"Is it the target?" The imperial mecha who had first spoken could not help but raise an eyebrow, somewhat surprised. He did not expect to be so lucky, discovering their target right from the get-go.

"Most probably ². Those baby fish are all trainee mecha of the academy. Two of them are even ace trainee mecha. They should be the two targets central command has assigned to us. Parker, I'll leave this end to you. I'll go handle those little fish, and once I'm done, we can return." The other imperial mecha could not help but lick his lips in anticipation. Compared to being a humanoid cannon without any need for skill or technique, he still much preferred teasing baby fish and having some fun.

"Don't go overboard." The imperial mecha which had first spoken could not help but warn the other. It seemed like the two imperial mecha had a good relationship.

"Chill, chill. When have I not completed a mission?" replied the other imperial mecha. Immediately after, he had operated his mecha to disappear into the night sky...

Tang Yu, who had been closely observing the two imperial mecha all this time, saw one of them abruptly disappear and his heart clenched. "Where did he go?"

Before he could search for the other's tracks, the remaining imperial mecha suddenly drew a giant cylindrical weapon almost as tall as the mecha itself from behind it. Tang Yu's face changed drastically at the sight and he shouted, "Dodge!"

As an elite ace, Tang Yu had very comprehensive knowledge of the imperial mecha he would be using once he advanced. The weapon the opponent had brought out was precisely the most powerful and horrifying beam energy weapon imperial mecha had — Line of Oblivion! As long as one was hit by the weapon, even an imperial mecha of the same level would only be able to survive by exhausting all of its power on its King Shield. Any mecha below imperial mecha absolutely could not survive a blow from this weapon. The only way to escape was to leave the attack range of the Line of Oblivion, which was why Tang Yu had immediately yelled out for his side to run.

"Boom!" The round cylinder in the imperial mecha's hands suddenly shot out a violet-black beam. At the moment it discharged, even a mecha as powerful as the imperial mecha could not keep its balance — the entire mecha was sent flying backwards; it

was clear to see how powerful the kickback of this cannon was.

Thanks to Tang Yu's warning, all the Federation mecha in the air swiftly flew out of the trajectory of the beam. Still, even so, several mecha who did not react fast enough were grazed by the violet-black beam. Even this tiny bit of contact was enough for the power contained by the beam to blow these mecha apart, turning them into hunks of debris before being vaporized to disappear without a trace into the air.

This one shot of the imperial mecha's cannon had been targeting the armoured ground forces fighting against the enemy mecha. Just one shot, and a circular black space appeared right in the centre of the neat rectangular formation of the armoured troops. Those troops standing within the circle had been swallowed by a wave of black, similarly disappearing without a trace...

"This is too horrific. We have no way of resisting this!" At the sight, one of the staff officers in ground command was unable to take the pressure and collapsed to his knees, wailing. Although imperial mecha were unable to determine the outcome of a battlefield outright like god-class mecha, the ground forces of the Federation which were already at a disadvantage just had no spare energy to resist against the enemy mecha anymore after receiving this devastating blow.

This spineless behaviour of the staff officer would normally have drawn the scorn and rebuke of others, but everyone in the command centre had been shocked dumb by this strike. The command centre was extraordinarily silent, desperation and despair spreading out like a shroud.

The imperial mecha saw that he had managed to wipe out almost one-sixth of the armoured ground forces with just one shot and nodded in satisfaction. "Truly impressive. This is the true value of us imperial operators..."

After saying that, the imperial operator stabilised his mecha and raised the cylinder once more. This time, he was aiming for the area several li behind the armoured troops, the radiantly shining dormitory district...

"What a great target!" The imperial operator licked in his lips excitedly. As long as he utterly destroyed that area, their mission would be half-completed. How funny that these Huaxians, thinking they were so smart, had created such a district-wide beam shield. This saved him a lot of effort, allowing him to find the target he wanted to hit so easily. It was just so bloody convenient.

Tang Yu, who had just led the instructors to evade the trajectory of the beam, saw where the cylinder was aimed at and could not help but cry, "Stop! Bastard!" He operated his mecha over in an attempt to prevent the attack, but it was already too late. The opponent pulled the trigger and another violet-black beam shot out from the cylinder...

"Boom!" The violet-black beam struck the beam shield of the dormitory district without mercy. The beam shield shattered instantly, but the beam was not weakened significantly. In the next moment, it blasted its way into the dormitory district. Many buildings were immediately consumed by the violet-black beam, and one-tenth of the initially lovely and tranquil dormitory district was gone.

Witnessing this, tears formed in Tang Yu's fierce gaze. Right when the beam struck its target, he could almost see the cadets inside being vaporised in the spray of dust and ash, and his heart twisted with anguish.

"Ain't this place big..." The imperial mecha grumbled, before once again lifting its cylinder to aim at the dormitory district, preparing to fire the second round of the Line of Oblivion.

"Stop, godd*mmit!" Tang Yu became frenzied. Without hesitation, he made his mecha leap towards the imperial mecha. Even though he knew this was suicidal, he just could not stand idly by and watch as the children died here...

"How impudent!" The imperial mecha saw an ace mecha charging like a reckless fool at him, trying to stop him from firing the Line of Oblivion. Sneering, he pulled the trigger, sending another violet-black beam shooting out of the cannon to barrel towards Tang Yu's mecha...

"Major Tang Yu!" the instructors all shouted in horror. Everyone there knew that as soon as the Line of Oblivion hit, Tang Yu was very unlikely to survive. Just as the violet-black beam was about to consume Tang Yu's mecha whole...

With a loud "boom!" the violet-black beam was abruptly stopped in its tracks by a powerful wave of energy. The beam then quickly dissipated, and amazingly, Tang Yu's mecha reappeared completely undamaged. What in the world had happened?

Even Tang Yu himself was equally stunned and confused. He had charged forwards, ready to sacrifice himself, hoping that he could exhaust as much of the power behind

the Line of Oblivion's attack as possible so that the dormitory district below would receive less damage. Unexpectedly, in that split second before he would have been struck by the attack, a pale blue beam had suddenly come from a distance to intercept the Line of Oblivion, saving him.

He instinctively looked in the direction where the pale blue beam had come from. In the night sky above, a mecha was flying here at high speed. A few seconds later, the mecha appeared before everyone's eyes...

Tang Yu teared up when he saw this mecha. Like a bullied child who had finally caught sight of a dependable adult, he could not help but cry out, "General Ling!"

Tang Yu had shouted this through his mecha's loudspeakers, so everyone on the battlefield heard this cry loud and clear!

Chapter 382

Daddy is Here!

The words 'General Ling' reverberated like thunder across the entire battlefield, jolting everyone's hearts. The two sides which had been at each other's throats abruptly stopped fighting, looking up at the mecha which had appeared so unexpectedly.

This mecha was much bigger and grander than the imperial mecha. The imperial mecha, which was already one size bigger than regular mecha, was just like a petite maiden, appearing extremely feeble in comparison. It possessed a classic and simple outer form unlike other mecha. The blazing phoenix totem on its chest and the five stars symbolizing its nationality emblazoned on its right arm could be clearly seen by everyone present.

All of this stirred up everyone on the battlefield. The warriors of the Huaxia Federation were shouting in excitement, uncoordinated chants of 'General Ling' slowly merging into a unified chorus... they were suffused with joy, and there were even many warriors who had tears streaming down their faces as they cheered.

In contrast, the flames of arrogance stoked by the reinforcement of the imperial operator were instantly dampened. Some mecha operators were even so terrified that they began to retreat — it was clear to see how nerve-wracking the emergence of this mecha was to them.

If it could be said that the battlefield had previously been plunged into silence by the appearance of the two imperial mecha, then the appearance of this mecha had caused the entire battle to freeze. The enemies, in particular, were scared stiff.

This was because everyone knew the identity behind this mecha who had suddenly descended upon the battlefield to block the imperial mecha's horrific attack. He was one of the twelve god-class operators of the Federation, the god-class operator termed to be the strongest in the future — he was one of the ten great generals of the Huaxia Federation, Ling Xiao!

Ling Xiao's reputation did not only echo throughout Huaxia; he was an awe-inspiring

existence across the whole world. The enemies knew very well that the moment they made any wrong move, Ling Xiao would definitely eliminate them in a heartbeat. Against such an ultimate weapon, they had no chance of victory.

In the ground command centre, the commander there gave himself a hard slap as soon as he saw Ling Xiao suddenly appear. The sharp pain woke him up, and he began laughing wildly even as his eyes began to redden. Mumbling to himself, he said, "General Ling has really come. He's here, he's here... victory will inevitably be ours, the Huaxia Federation's!" That final phrase was shouted at top volume. It was clear to see how much he had struggled and suffered in the battle thus far. And now, he could finally let it all out.

This cry of his jolted all the other staff in the command centre out of their stunned stupor. They immediately began to dance and cheer — within the span of a few short minutes, they had risen from the pits of despair to having hope again. Several officers with weaker hearts even slumped to the ground, unable to get up in the interim as they both cried and laughed in relief.

Rushing onto the scene, Ling Xiao's gaze had turned instantly to where Ling Lan lived on campus. When he saw thick clouds of smoke billowing from the dormitory district and the chaos and destruction within it, his gaze turned cold as he realised he had still been a step too late.

Ling Xiao's heart was filled with frustration and anxiety; he did not know whether his daughter was alright. Though typically calm, he finally could not suppress the killing intent in his heart. Without hesitation, he raised the gun in his hands and aimed it at the imperial mecha who had caused this terrible scene.

He absolutely would not allow this imperial mecha who may have harmed his precious daughter to escape his grasp. He would make the other pay the price in blood!

"Ling Xiao, you cannot do this." The imperial operator sensed a great threat; he knew that the other's killing intent had been invoked. Once one entered the imperial realm, they would be able to sense an opponent's killing intent.

The imperial operator knew very well that he was no match for a god-class operator. Against a god-class operator, other than rivals of the same rank, the only other way to deal with them was to rely on a considerable number of fearless imperial operators to employ mutual destruction methods... perhaps then there would still be some chance

of injuring the other. Take a good look — that's only to injure, not destroy. At their level, no miraculous cross-level upset was possible.

"If you kill me, you'll violate the international joint declaration," barked the imperial operator.

"Since the moment you first chose to open fire and shoot, you have already lost the right to say that to me," replied Ling Xiao coldly. Anyone who dared touch his daughter should be prepared to die.

Ling Xiao pulled the trigger without hesitation, and a pale blue beam shot out from the muzzle of the gun, heading straight for the opponent's mecha.

The imperial operator instantly kicked his mecha into flash evasion. In the blink of an eye, the imperial mecha had already dashed several hundred metres from his original location. Everyone on the ground saw the imperial mecha evade the beam Ling Xiao had shot. However, just as the Federation warriors were about to sigh and the enemy cheer, the very next second, everything changed. Everyone stared in silent stupefaction at the imperial mecha, unable to make any sound.

The right arm of the imperial mecha which had already flashed a hundred or so metres away had actually been destroyed. That massive Line of Oblivion which had been hoisted on his right shoulder slipped due to the loss of support to crash heavily into the ground, making a loud crash.

What in the world had happened? Very soon, some of the mecha operators with quick minds quickly realised that the imperial mecha's right arm must have been destroyed by that beam Ling Xiao had shot. But, how had the beam which had already been evaded still manage to strike the imperial mecha's arm?

Almost everyone was unable to figure it out, completely baffled, because they did not believe that their eyes could have been mistaken. Only Tang Yu's gaze flashed, a trace of confusion on his brow despite having some vague flash of comprehension that he just could not put words to.

Only the imperial operator who had been shot knew exactly how he had been hit. When the opponent had fired, he had used the highest form of shooting skill —— Temporal Shadow!

Temporal Shadow was actually a form of illusion — that is, the speed and the beam of

light seen by the attacker were in fact all fake. In other words, when Ling Xiao had shot, the opponent had already fallen victim to a kind of misperception; this was an ability that only god-class operators could possess. The imperial operator only understood because he had once received some guidance from a god-class operator in his own country. The imperial operator felt that he might have already been hit even before he evaded — it's just that he had only noticed it after he evaded.

This was a god-class operator — he had no way to resist! The imperial operator finally experienced the same helplessness ace operators felt when they faced him... Before he could regain his mental balance, a dark shadow had already appeared in front of him.

Pow pow pow pow! Four beams of cold light flashed by and in the next second, the imperial mecha's sole remaining left arm had been sliced cleanly off. The final blow of the sword pierced mercilessly through the imperial mecha's cockpit. With Ling Xiao's capabilities, he could certainly have finished off the opponent in one blow. However, it would be hard to quell Ling Xiao's rage with just one blow...

The imperial mecha, who had strutted around proudly, terrorizing the entire battlefield, was eliminated so efficiently — everyone present at the scene was gobsmacked. Although they had always known that god-class mecha were ultimate weapons of the human world, that was after all just a legend. Many warriors would never witness a god-class mecha operator in battle all their lives, and so they would never truly comprehend what that description truly meant. Right then, after truly seeing a god-class operator in action, they finally understood why only god-class mecha were called the ultimate weapons of the human world... the imperial mecha which had so frightened them was nothing before the god-class mecha. Like any other mecha before a god-class mecha, its existence was at the level of an ant.

Ling Xiao's rage was not appeased by destroying one imperial mecha; in the next moment, he had already appeared in the air above the armoured troops.

"Activate Divine Punishment system!" His own daughter's life hung in the balance because of these intruders. Ling Xiao's heart was surging with killing intent — without hesitation, he unleashed the god-class mecha's most fearsome weapon, the Divine Punishment system.

"Command received by <Belief>, Divine Punishment activated!" In less than a second, twelve beautiful wings unfurled from god-class mecha <Belief>'s back — the wings

absorbed energy rapidly, reaching its peak level in the blink of an eye.

"Fire!" Ling Xiao said icily as he pressed the trigger in his hands without mercy. Twelve beams of light swept towards the enemy formations held off by the armoured troops, leaving white spots in everyone's vision for several seconds... when the light faded and everyone's vision returned to normal, twelve lanes of white space had been carved into the ground. In the spaces, there was no longer any sign of mecha, not even debris — it was as if the mecha had been instantly vaporized.

This devastating firepower once again drove the point home on why god-class mecha were called the ultimate weapons of the human world — nothing could stand in the way of this power.

One round of Divine Punishment had almost wiped out half of the enemy mecha; the entire enemy camp suddenly appeared so empty and insubstantial. Ling Xiao's rage was only slightly alleviated; ending his attack, he once more teleported to hover in the air and decisively took charge of the general military-wide commlink and ordered, "All forces, attack! Clear the battlefield!" Since they dared to invade, then they should be prepared to die — Ling Xiao had never intended for any of these enemies to leave the planet alive.

"Yes, sir!" At Ling Xiao's command, all of the Huaxian soldiers responded spiritedly. They had been lifted from despair to hope over the course of a few minutes, and had now seen the budding fruit of victory from the heights of hope. Right then, they were fully motivated — the frustration from fighting at a disadvantage, completely overpowered, had finally disappeared. All of the warriors were bursting with energy, leaping towards those remaining enemy mecha like a pack of hungry wolves...

While everyone charged at the remaining enemies, only Tang Yu flew towards Ling Xiao, shouting, "General Ling, there is still one more imperial mecha. He has already infiltrated the military academy..."

Ling Xiao had already been planning to go check on Ling Lan in the dormitory district. Hearing what Tang Yu said, his heart clenched — for the other imperial mecha to let go of the obvious battle merits here to secretly infiltrate the school, what exactly was the other after?

Ling Xiao had the same thought as Ling Lan. The very first thing that came to mind was — could it be that his daughter's actions at the Swift Dragon base had been

exposed? However, Ling Xiao very quickly eliminated this possibility. Although he had been staying at the military academy for the past period of time, he had still remained well-informed of the situation on the outside. There had been no sign at all that the Caesar Empire had sensed anything new...

Suddenly, Ling Xiao's face shifted subtly, and in the very next second, he had vanished from Tang Yu's sight. Only his words echoed in the air, "Leave it to me!"

Ling Xiao unstintingly expended his mecha's power to utilize the Divine Wind system. Just a moment before, he had received a message from his daughter. The message consisted of only a set of coordinates, along with one word: Help!

Ling Xiao was consumed with worry and rage — he could almost guarantee that that last bloody imperial mecha must be at those coordinates!

"Lan-er, hold on for another 5 seconds. Daddy will be there soon~!" Ling Xiao was very confident that he would definitely be able to rush to the scene within 5 seconds using the Divine Wind system. However, he also knew that, up against an imperial mecha, 5 seconds could very well already decide whether his daughter would live or die...

Chapter 383

A Game!

After the other imperial mecha abruptly left the dormitory district, it arrived at an area several kilometres away several seconds later, where it then intercepted the Thunder King's gang which had been sneaking away from the dormitory district.

Seeing this enemy imperial mecha which had suddenly appeared before them, even the confident Thunder King Qiao Ting instantly lost his composure. His first reaction was to lead his team members to run in a desperate bid for escape.

"What a bunch of limp eggs!" said the imperial operator scornfully. He looked towards the distance — on the escape path this group had chosen, a team of eight mecha was heading right towards them in this direction...

"Perhaps, I can play a fun game." A creepy smile emerged on the imperial operator's lips; this was his favourite game.

Having come to some decision, the imperial operator did not choose to destroy the Thunder King's group directly. Instead, he tailed them like an unshakeable shadow, slowly yet surely. At the same time, he enforced signal interference onto this sector, making it impossible for the two mecha teams to discover each other's presence beforehand with their radars...

"Eh?" The imperial operator suddenly cried out in surprise. He had noticed the eight mecha rushing here suddenly stop — could it be that they had sensed something? The imperial operator immediately denied this possibility, because the interference function of an imperial mecha was unable to be cracked by mecha other than god-class mecha.

"How troublesome!" The other party's subsequent actions puzzled the imperial mecha and soured his mood. He could not help but curse and mutter under his breath before disappearing in a flash.

Running for their lives, at the brink of despair, the Thunder King's group suddenly found that the imperial mecha chasing after them all this while had suddenly

vanished. Unable to help themselves, all of the mecha fell to their knees — the only one who managed to stay on his feet was the Thunder King...

"He's letting us go?" Qiao Ting asked disbelievingly. Had that butcher's knife hanging high above their heads truly just gone away? The Thunder King really wondered if he was dreaming.

"That person is gone. He must have decided to let us go," answered one of his team members, panting. He was very grateful to keep his life — when they had been running earlier with the imperial mecha hot on their tail, he had really thought that they were all done for.

"Boss, while that person is away, let us quickly leave this place!" Another member was still extremely frightened. Even though his stamina was almost depleted by their desperate dash for survival earlier, he still felt that it was better to leave this dangerous location as soon as they could.

"Then, where should we go? We have no idea where the enemy has gone. What if we just happen to choose the same direction that person is heading towards? Isn't that just asking for trouble?" Yet another member glanced at his radar and saw that everything was empty on it. This meant that there were no other mecha within a ten-kilometre radius of them, making it seem as if this spot was very safe. However, the more things appeared this way, the harder it felt for him to make a decision.

"Let's just go back to the dormitory district. There are Federation troops there, and Instructor Tang Yu is there too." Someone suggested that they head back from whence they came. In their minds, Instructor Tang Yu was the strongest — perhaps he could protect them. Besides, there was both power and safety in numbers.

"No, I believe that it would be even more dangerous there. Didn't you see how all the enemies focused their attacks there? I'm wondering whether that imperial mecha has gone over to reinforce the forces at the dormitory district. If he has really gone there, even if Instructor Tang Yu is there, he won't be able to handle it," said Qiao Ting with a bitter smile. Even though Instructor Tang Yu was a king of aces, against an imperial operator, he was equally vulnerable.

Of course, although Qiao Ting did not want to go back for the reason he had mentioned, there was still another reason for his resistance. He had domineeringly led his group of twelve away earlier because he had wanted to earn battle merits and

establish himself — if he ran back now with his tail between his legs, Qiao Ting felt that it would be just too great a loss of face. He did not want to go back and become the butt of jokes for those three members who had refused to come with him.

"Yes, the regiment commander is right." The member most supportive of Qiao Ting once again jumped out to back Qiao Ting's decision.

"It's better for us to continue moving forwards in this direction. If the imperial operator was planning to head this way anyway, I really can't figure out why he would choose to disappear on his own. Wouldn't it have made more sense to keep following us?" Qiao Ting bit out, then finally chose to continue with his previous course.

Qiao Ting's words were undoubtedly logical. Moreover, he was also the regiment commander, so even if some of the members had some reservations, they could only tag along since the majority agreed with their leader...

Meanwhile, on Ling Lan's end, her team had been charging at high speed towards the dormitory district when she suddenly stopped. As soon as Ling Lan stopped, without her having to say a word, the rest of her team members tacitly stopped moving as well. They silently spread out around Ling Lan — highly used to working together, they knew what to do. They believed that their team leader would not have stopped for no reason; he must have noticed something.

Ling Lan had stopped because, inside her mindspace, Little Four had suddenly shouted a warning that there was an enemy ahead and that this enemy was actually an imperial mecha!

This news stunned Ling Lan. She immediately chose to stop her mecha, turning in her mind to ask Little Four what exactly was going on.

Little Four was also very distressed. Hands wrapped around his head, he said in disbelief, "I also can't figure it out. Doesn't this world have a joint declaration that mecha above ace level are not allowed to appear on a battlefield?"

"Boss, we better change directions and run! The other has most likely already noticed us..." Little Four had some shielding ability, but he was not confident that his shielding would work as flawlessly against an imperial mecha. He immediately suggested that his boss temporarily run away to avoid the enemy.

"Okay!" replied Ling Lan decisively. She signalled for her team members to follow her,

turning 90 degrees left in a swift escape...

Backtracking along their original route, they would certainly bump into the unidentified enemy — Ling Lan naturally did not want to take the risk. Also, if they turned right instead, they would indirectly shorten the distance between them and the imperial mecha — Ling Lan did not want to chance it. Only by turning left and heading up could they put as much distance as they could between them and the imperial mecha.

However, Ling Lan's team had not even flown this way for 10 seconds when Little Four yelled out, "He's found us! He has given up on his original prey and is rushing towards us... estimated time of arrival, 10 seconds!" This final phrase was said with a whine, because Little Four really could not think of any way for them to escape from the demonic clutches of the imperial operator.

Ling Lan gritted her teeth at those words, once again putting the brakes on her rapid sprint. She abruptly turned her head around to shout, "Prepare to fight!"

This cry of Ling Lan's instantly caused her well-trained team to stop and turn around like Ling Lan to get ready to face the enemy. At the same time, they took the weapons hanging on their backs into their hands.

Just when they had finished doing all this, in the night sky above them, a huge mecha appeared out of thin air. Its glorious and lovely chassis made everyone's face change. Familiar with mecha of every level, they naturally recognised that this was an imperial mecha.

At the same time, they also understood now why Boss Lan had asked them to prepare for battle. Before an imperial operator, it was utterly impossible to escape by running. As such, they might as well choose to fight — even if they died, they would at least die with some dignity.

"How interesting, actually able to choose death so calmly..." Seeing how this group made a completely different decision from the previous group, the imperial mecha was exhilarated. The more he saw how brave and upstanding they were, the more he felt like abusing them. He wanted to see what these people would choose to do in the face of death — would they heroically leap to their death, or would they betray their principles to live?

"I will give you all one chance to live. Go back to the path you all were using previously, and you will encounter a group of people with 13 mecha. As long as you all kill everyone in the other group, I'll let you all go!" The imperial mecha suddenly turned on its external speakers to tell Ling Lan's team.

Ling Lan's gaze narrowed. "If I'm not mistaken, that group must be from our side. You want to see us fight amongst ourselves?"

Applause rang out from the other's speakers, and the imperial operator's sinister voice quickly followed, "You're very smart! Yes, indeed, I really want to see you all fighting and killing each other. And this just so happens to be your only chance to survive. Refuse, and the outcome for both your teams is death, though you will all just die at my hands."

"Of course, you can also choose to sacrifice yourself. Lead your team to meet the other group and commit suicide, and I can also let those people go," suggested the imperial operator with a smile. He was just like Satan, spreading the seeds of temptation which you could not refuse.

Ling Lan fell silent. All of a sudden, she did not know how to choose — the opponent had given her a reason she could not refuse. Just as Ling Lan hesitated, Little Four's despairing face was suddenly painted with pleasant surprise. He shouted loudly, "Boss, Daddy's here!"

"I agree!" Ling Lan's heart surged with joy as she replied decisively. Ling Lan was neither planning to kill the other team to survive, nor was she planning to lead her team to kill themselves. She was only trying her best to drag things out. Since she knew a saviour had come, it would really be too stupid to die here out of carelessness.

As Ling Lan replied, she did not forget to command Little Four inside the mindscape, "Little Four, quickly think of a way to send dad a message so he can come save us!"

"The other team is heading here right now. I'll give you all 10 seconds. If you all still have not met up with them after 10 seconds, I will destroy all of you, because you are all trash unworthy of playing this game." The imperial operator did not do as Ling Lan wished and give her more time — instead, he gave Ling Lan's team yet another rule to follow, giving them no choice but to work hard.

"I'll begin the count now... 1..." The imperial operator did not give Ling Lan's team any

more time to prepare, beginning to count the moment he finished issuing his newest rule. When Ling Lan heard '1', she was the first to turn her mecha and rush back in their original direction.

No matter what the situation would be like 10 seconds later, she needed to make full use of these 10 seconds to do as the other had said. Her only hope was that Little Four could make contact with her father as soon as possible...

Seeing their boss charging out like a ferocious tiger, Ling Lan's team responded swiftly. All of them also operated their mecha to follow after their boss...

"What a bunch of obedient children! Things are gonna be fun now!" The imperial operator licked his lips in excitement at the sight, cackling maliciously. A second later, that grand and lovely imperial mecha once again vanished from the sky, leaving no trace behind.

Chapter 384

Little Four's Mistake!

"Movement!" Qiao Ting's group, which was rushing towards Ling Lan's group, suddenly felt vibrations coming from below their feet.

Everyone became nervous — because their radars were still blank, they had no idea what exactly was behind these vibrations.

The vibrations were gentle at the start, but several seconds later, they became more and more intense. Qiao Ting's group knew that something was about to appear before them soon.

"Godd*mmmit, our radar scanning functions have all stopped working." Only now did Qiao Ting's team realise this fact. However, they did not know that this was a result of the imperial operator blocking all the signals within this sector. If Ling Lan had not possessed the oddball Little Four, she too would have been just like Qiao Ting's team, completely oblivious to the others' presence till they actually bumped into them.

"Prepare to fight!" Qiao Ting instantly gave his orders. No matter what appeared, preparing to fight would never be wrong. Of course, Qiao Ting could be certain that it definitely was not that imperial operator who was creating such an intense vibration. Ruling out the threat of that imperial operator, Qiao Ting behaved calmly and rationally.

"Yes, Regiment Commander!" Qiao Ting's composure calmed the rest of his team down as well. They all drew the weapons from their backs, preparing to meet these unexpected enemies. Of course, it was also possible that the comers were friendlies, but having been frightened by the imperial operator previously, their nerves were taut and they did not dare to take things lightly.

As the point man of the team, the mecha standing right at the front was the first to see the outer forms of the newcomers. Pleasant surprise flashed through his eyes and he hurriedly reported on his team commlink, "The outer form of the mecha has been confirmed to be trainee mecha from the academy. Level: advanced, 5 mecha! Oh, another has appeared, and that mecha is —— an ace mecha!"

When the other team members heard that the other party was operating advanced trainee mecha of the academy, their hearts settled. However, when the point man added that last bit in a tone a whole octave higher, everyone was stupefied...

This was because everyone knew that, in the entire military academy, only their regiment commander, Thunder King Qiao Ting of Leiting, was qualified to operate ace mecha. They had not heard of any other person in the academy capable of piloting ace mecha so far. Could it be that the one piloting it was an instructor?

That was their first thought, but this notion was quickly overturned. All of the ace level instructors in the academy had their own personal ace mecha — they would never choose to pilot this type of ace trainee mecha which was obviously weaker than military-use ace mecha on all fronts.

Could it be that the person inside was operating it beyond their true level? Excluding operation by an instructor, this was the only other possibility they could think of. However, after observing that ace mecha's movements, they once again ruled out this speculation. That ace mecha's movements were natural, without any sense of stiffness or choppiness. This meant that the operator inside was operating it with ease, and this was absolutely not something someone operating across levels could do. Cross-level operation was very taxing and difficult — every step would drain a tremendous amount of the operator's mental strength and physical stamina. As such, it would be impossible for the mecha's movements to seem so smooth and natural.

Before Qiao Ting's team could come up with a reasonable explanation, the two sides were finally facing each other in the blink of an eye. About 100 metres or so away, the other party suddenly stopped, and the six mecha faced them from that distance without approaching any closer.

Just as Qiao Ting was about to initiate conversation and ask the other group some questions, a ripple appeared in the air above them, and that missing imperial mecha once again appeared before Qiao Ting's group.

Seeing this familiar imperial mecha, the faces of Qiao Ting's group instantly turned pale. Even Qiao Ting could not help but feel his heart drop, yelling internally that they were all done for. Who could have guessed that they were still unable to escape from the enemy's demonic clutches in the end? Could it be that they were really about to die here today?

As Qiao Ting and the others could not help but be swamped with despair, the imperial operator hovering in the air suddenly spoke, "Both teams, Listen well. As long as you can kill everyone in the other team, then you will have earned the right to continue living. Otherwise, I will personally take action, and at that time, no one from either team will be spared."

Qiao Ting's pupils contracted at these words. He had not expected the imperial mecha to have brought the other team over here because he wanted to see them fight among themselves. Although he was unsure who exactly was piloting the other ace trainee mecha, there was no doubt that the members of that team were cadets just like them.

The two teams were originally trustworthy comrades from the same side who could entrust their backs to each other, but now they were being forced to fight each other to the death...

Did he really have to kill them? Qiao Ting's heart was conflicted — if there was any hope of surviving, of course he did not want to die. He believed that his team of 13 would definitely be able to obtain victory against the other's group of 6, because aside from the one ace mecha, the other 5 in the other group were only advanced mecha. Meanwhile, on Leiting's side, other than his own ace mecha, the others were all special-class mecha. Whether it was in terms of numbers or level of mecha, his team had the absolute upper hand.

But for the sake of survival, were they really going to kill their own schoolmates, their future comrades? Qiao Ting shivered violently. He could not imagine staining his hands with the blood of companions. If he truly did so, how would he be any different from an inhuman beast?

"There are things a person must do, and there are things a person must never do!" "Since you've already decided to be a mecha operator, you must be prepared to sacrifice yourself." Instructor Tang Yu's austere voice rang out suddenly in his mind's ear, and Qiao Ting jolted to awareness.

Yes, if they really did as the imperial operator said and chose to fight to the death among themselves just to survive, even if they were fortunate enough to survive in the end, their beliefs and principles would have been ruthlessly crushed in the process.

Qiao Ting's gaze turned from confusion to clarity, from hesitation to determination... finally, after several seconds of silence, Qiao Ting spoke up to say, "I refuse!" Although

Qiao Ting was extremely proud and self-assured, and loved to be in control — a genius who could stoop to some dirty means in order to achieve his objectives — he would never trade a comrade's life in order to ensure his own survival.

Qiao Ting's resolute refusal made a trace of admiration flash across Ling Lan's eyes. His refusal was equivalent to giving up on his own life. No matter how one looked at the situation, Qiao Ting's side was sure to win if the two teams fought.

Qiao Ting's words made the members of his team cry out in shock, but they very quickly settled down again. Perhaps the imperial operator's suggestion had indeed caused the hearts of some of Qiao Ting's members to waver, but when Qiao Ting firmly refused, though they felt a little disappointed, they were mostly more relieved.

If Qiao Ting had chosen to kill the other team, it might really have been possible for all of them to survive, but they would certainly have been mentally and spiritually tormented after the fact. They may even have had to worry whether, one day in the future, Qiao Ting might also sell them out for his own benefit.

Qiao Ting's words caused the imperial operator's eyes to turn cold. Furious, he raised the gun in his hand and aimed it at Qiao Ting, sneering as he said, "You actually dare to refuse me?! I am very angry. In that case, let me start with you!" That said, he pulled the trigger and a powerful beam was fired from the muzzle.

Seeing this, Qiao Ting quickly operated his mecha to evade, but the speed of the other's attack was extremely fast. This speed greatly exceeded the shooting speed of an ace mecha's beam gun, taking Qiao Ting slightly off-guard. Despite trying his best to dodge, he still only managed to move the vital points of his mecha out of the danger zone. Just as the shot looked like it would hit Qiao Ting's left leg, a whirling giant metal sword suddenly appeared before him, perfectly placed to block that beam attack.

There was a loud 'boom' and the giant sword clattered to the ground. At this time, the giant sword no longer looked anything like a giant sword. Though the giant sword, which was several times sturdier than the outer shell of a mecha, had managed to block that beam, the immense power behind it had still melted the giant sword down into a large metal block. Some tiny holes could even be seen in the metal block.

The power of the beam finally dissipated, and Qiao Ting looked down fearfully at the giant metal sword which had fallen at his feet... oh, no, now, it could only be called a large metal block; only the two ends retained some impression of being a sword. He

knew that if not for the abrupt appearance of this giant sword, that attack just now would definitely have damaged his mecha. If he was truly unlucky, the attack may even have endangered his life.

Qiao Ting could not help but look towards the other trainee ace mecha with gratitude in his eyes. The other's actions had also made his stance clear — he too did not want to fight and kill schoolmates and companions.

Sure enough, Qiao Ting received a communications request from the other immediately after. Although Qiao Ting did not know how the other managed to connect to his team's commlink, it was all unimportant as long as they could communicate and confirm their partnership in fighting against the enemy.

Ling Lan briefly explained the situation to Qiao Ting, and after confirming their partnership, she turned anxiously to ask Little Four whether he had managed to contact her father.

In the mindspace, Little Four was similarly anxious, his back drenched with sweat. Knowing that his and Boss Lan's life were at stake, Little Four, who should not have known what nervousness was, actually could not control his own emotions. The core chip which gave him life once again entered a high-temperature state...

"Boss, I'm still unsuccessful. The security procedures of the god-class mecha are too powerful; I cannot infiltrate the other's mainframe anytime soon," replied Little Four quickly, wiping away the sweat on his forehead.

"All you have to do is send a distress message to dad!" When Ling Lan heard what he said, her initially sweaty forehead instantly beaded up with even more sweat. Who knew that Little Four would make such a mistake at this critical moment, actually choosing such a difficult path. Just think, the mecha her dad was operating was a god-class mecha — if the mainframe procedures of a god-class mecha were so easy to crack, would it still be a god-class mecha?

Ling Lan's words caused Little Four to freeze, abruptly realising what a stupid thing he had been trying to do. Yes, didn't he just have to send their coordinates and the news that they were in danger over to daddy? There really was no need to actually talk to the other...

Little Four had tried to hack into and take over the other mecha out of habit to connect

to the other's commlink and communicate directly; he had completely overlooked the fact that he could have just sent a message over to Ling Xiao to ask for help...

"Boss, I'll send the message immediately." Little Four did not dare to meet Ling Lan's eyes in his shame and frustration. Boss must definitely be annoyed with him now — why had he been so stupid? Little Four's heart was a plain of darkness — the initially bright and lovely future looked so dark and lifeless all of a sudden. He might be kicked off his number one follower's throne by Boss because of this.

Chapter 385

Immortal Bird Ling Xiao!

Even though Little Four was in low spirits, he still sent their coordinates and the word 'HELP' over to Ling Xiao. Then, he notified Ling Lan before he fell silent.

Little Four was self-reflecting — ever since he had experienced so-called human emotions, he had no longer acted like before under his initial settings and procedures, where he served the host he was contracted to according to the rules set by the learning space. Many times, even though he was meant to obtain his host's agreement before acting, he had still chosen to decide things on his own.

In the past, it was fortunate that there had been no great problems, but this most recent mistake — just because he skipped asking his boss first, he ended up doing a stupid thing, delaying any rescue they could receive — could have ended up killing his boss... Little Four was truly racked with guilt. He decided that from now on, he would check in with his boss more often; he could not continue acting recklessly anymore.

As Ling Lan wrapped up her conversation with Little Four, the imperial operator, having seen his attack interrupted by Ling Lan's giant sword, was instantly in a horrible mood.

"Damn, actually daring to fight back? Die!" Enraged, the imperial operator once again raised the gun in his hands, but this time, he was aiming at Ling Lan. Compared to Qiao Ting, he now hated this person who had ruined his attack even more. He felt as if his pride as an imperial operator had been violated — he needed to kill the other to let everyone know that the pride of an imperial operator should never be violated.

"Attack together!" Ling Lan naturally would not just wait around to be killed; she chose to defend by attacking. Among everyone on the field, only she and Qiao Ting could perhaps offer some resistance; sending anyone else would be a death sentence. Thus, this cry of hers was directed at Qiao Ting.

When he was up against a terrifying imperial operator on his own, Qiao Ting was perhaps at a loss due to the power gap, becoming a sitting duck due to overwhelming fear and despair. But now, with an allied peer beside him to fight alongside him, the

proud Qiao Ting would never allow himself to lose against the other.

After calling out to Qiao Ting, Ling Lan instantly charged over. Her speed was very fast — she was almost by the imperial mecha's side in the blink of an eye. Even though her giant sword was gone, she still had a beam saber, which she swung viciously at the other.

On the other side, Qiao Ting leapt up at almost the same time, revving his engines to shoot up into the sky. The two beam guns on his back suddenly appeared in his mecha's hands, and Qiao Ting pulled on the triggers in a frenzy. Countless beams poured out of the two guns in an instant, raining down like a meteor shower at the imperial operator.

Facing the foolish resistance of the two, the imperial operator started laughing at the apex of his rage. "Petty tricks! You're just asking for death!" The initially hovering mecha suddenly disappeared only to appear again 30 metres away in the next second, easily resolving Ling Lan's and Qiao Ting's combined attack.

Not only that, his disappearance caused all of Qiao Ting's beam attacks to fly towards Ling Lan. Seeing his own attacks about to hit a companion by mistake, in his great horror, Qiao Ting cried out hoarsely, "Dodge!"

"What a dumb pig of a teammate!" Li Lanfeng, who was seated beside Ling Lan, could not help but grouch. Firing long-range attacks against an imperial operator specialising in long-range attacks; Qiao Ting's brain must definitely have become scrambled from being shot at.

Ling Lan said nothing; seeing the rain of beams heading for them, she did not panic. Calmly, she operated her mecha into some quick evasion manoeuvres, at the same time turning the power on her mecha's beam shield up to its maximum setting. As long as the same weak spot was not hit again, being at the same level, her ace mecha's beam shield would still be able to block these beam attacks.

Of course, Ling Lan did not plan on getting hit if she could help it. If she were hit, even if her mecha would be fine, its power would be greatly drained. And because Ling Lan had been continuously battling, her ace mecha's power was already running low. Therefore, she had no choice but to be careful and use the remaining power sparingly.

Ling Lan's mecha actually left a trail of shadow in the air from moving so quickly —

the beams hurtling at her passed through the afterimages to fall to the ground, blasting dust and dirt into the air.

Just as Ling Lan evaded the shots, Qiao Ting did not even have the time to breathe a sigh of relief before the imperial operator's attacks had come swiftly and silently.

It turned out that after the imperial operator had shifted 30 metres away, both Ling Lan and Qiao Ting was now within his shooting range. Seeing those two small fishes occupied with each other, the imperial operator slyly raised the beam gun in his hands and pulled the trigger twice in quick succession.

He wanted to finish off these two small fishes in one go — he, who was an expert in long-range attacks to begin with, was a master at changing the direction of his shots without having to pause.

Ling Lan and Qiao Ting suddenly felt a deep chill penetrate their very bones — this was a danger alarm that only ace operators possessed. The both of them knew that the most dangerous moment was upon them...

Ling Lan quickly located where the danger was coming from — perhaps spurred by the life-or-death situation, the speed of Ling Lan's fingers once again exploded forth, becoming so quick that her fingers were no longer visible. Li Lanfeng felt as if even his eyes could no longer keep up...

Ling Lan's mecha began to spin — due to the extreme speed, many layers of afterimages of the mecha appeared. This scene flabbergasted the twelve Leiting mecha, because they knew this was the most advanced of ace mecha evasion techniques — Shadow Slip! Even Qiao Ting could not pull off this technique perfectly, unable to execute it with such precision and accuracy.

Meanwhile, Qiao Ting swiftly moved his mecha back, raising the two guns in his hands to shoot frenziedly at that beam heading straight for him. Here, Qiao Ting's long-range accuracy was on full display. Even though his mecha was retreating at high speed, every shot from both his left and right hand struck true. When the beam was only 10 metres or so from him, it was finally completely neutralised by the beam attacks of his two guns...

Ling Lan's evasion was effective as well. The beam heading for her brushed through one of the afterimages of her mecha to hit the ground, instantly blasting a 10-metre

wide ditch into the ground. It was clear to see how powerful the beam had been — even an ace mecha would not have fared well against it.

Looking at the responses of the two, although Ling Lan's method seemed to be more dangerous, in truth, Qiao Ting had had a harder time of it than Ling Lan. Because in that instant, to ensure that every single shot of his guns would strike the enemy's beam, Qiao Ting's mental and physical focus had been raised to their limits. Thus, as soon as he cancelled out the enemy's beam attack with the power of his own attacks, his entire body was already drenched with sweat, and he could feel that his two arms were stiff and numb.

Seeing how both his attacks had been successfully evaded by these two insignificant small fries before him, the imperial operator was almost dizzy with anger. He felt that this was a disgrace! Thus, he drew another gun from behind him. This gun's muzzle was wider than his first gun, and its rear end where the energy block should be inserted was also two to three times thicker.

When Ling Lan and Qiao Ting saw this gun, their faces changed drastically. They knew what it was — it was the most powerful long-range weapon with the largest attack scope imperial mecha possessed. When it was fired, its beams would present in the shape of a fan. Against this weapon, neither Ling Lan's evasion technique, Shadow Slip, nor Qiao Ting's power neutralization approach would work. That was because those two methods were ineffective against this type of area-of-effect weapons.

What worried Ling Lan even more was that no one knew exactly where the beams fired by this gun would go. The unknown and uncertain quality of this weapon not only put Ling Lan and Qiao Ting in great danger, it also drew the spectating members of their two teams into danger as well.

After the imperial operator brought out this weapon, a cruel smile bloomed on his lips. Right now, he no longer had any mind to play around — he only wanted to annihilate all of these cadets; only then would his bellyful of rage be appeased.

"Go to hell!" The imperial operator pulled on his trigger forcefully, firing not just once but many times. Due to the high speed, those beams actually merged into a semicircle, which charged relentlessly towards Ling Lan and Qiao Ting, as well as the other team members below them.

"Dodge!" Ling Lan and Qiao Ting shouted almost simultaneously. Compared to Qiao

Ting, Ling Lan was even more anxious. After all, Qi Long and the others of her team were only piloting advanced mecha — even if they were merely brushed by these power beams, they would certainly lose their lives in the destruction of their mecha. The power behind this imperial mecha's weapon was just too strong — even an ace mecha, using all of the power at its disposal, would probably only be able to withstand one of its beam attacks, not to mention advanced mecha which were considerably weaker than ace mecha.

Everyone was evading as best as they could, but the level gap of the mecha still put quite a number of the boys into a desperate situation. Ling Lan flew with all her might towards the advanced mecha closest to her — she could not save everyone, so she could only focus on saving the member closest to her.

It could not be denied that Ling Lan's heart was tinged with regret right now. If she had known that the enemy this time was so formidable, perhaps she should have just made everyone hide within the air raid shelter...

There was a loud 'boom' as a pale blue beam abruptly intervened, striking those scattered beams and causing them to dissipate instantly. Not only that, the power behind the pale blue beam was not whittled much by the exchange, continuing to fly through the air to hit the ground, where it then carved out a ditch of about 50 metres. Several team members close to that spot — whether it was from Ling Lan's team or the Leiting Mecha Clan — were sent tumbling by the violent tremors caused by the beam striking the ground. Those whose control skills were a little weaker were even sent flying by the aftershock.

Seeing his sure-kill attack being ruined by a measly little beam, the imperial operator's face changed. He turned to seek the source of the attack and saw a ripple appear in an initially empty bit of space in the air, and then, a large and simplistic mecha was revealed.

Behind its back, twelve majestic wings were spread out gloriously, beautiful and dazzling. A fiery red phoenix was dancing in flames on its chest, marking the operator's identity, and the golden five-star emblem on its right arm declared which nation he hailed from...

This unbelievably familiar mecha caused the imperial operator's heart to turn cold. All top-class operators had a dossier with detailed information on all of the god-class operators of every nation. The outer appearance of this mecha and the totem on its

chest... he would never mistake it. From the country designated as the Huaxia Federation, the presumed strongest god-class operator for the next 100 years —— the Immortal Bird Ling Xiao!

The imperial operator was petrified, and other than Ling Lan, everyone else in Ling Lan's team and all of Qiao Ting's group were similarly stunned.

Chapter 386

Li Lanfeng's Illness?

Li Lanfeng, who was sitting beside Ling Lan, looked at that magnificent giant mecha in the night sky in dazed shock, unable to react for a long moment. Reflexively, he clutched Ling Lan's arm and stammered, "Ling... Ling... G-General Ling Xiao!"

Seeing her father appear like a deity before her at this most critical moment to rescue everyone, Ling Lan was similarly overwhelmed with gratitude and excitement. At the same time, she was also extremely proud. See, see, this was her father! In every child's heart, their father should be the greatest. Despite having lived two lives, Ling Lan was no exception to this young daughter mentality.

However, when Li Lanfeng clutched her arm, all of Ling Lan's excitement and proud happiness fled. She frowned slightly, glancing at the large hand on her arm. Say, she really did not like others touching her body...

Ling Lan's cold gaze swept harshly over Li Lanfeng, rife with warning, hoping that Li Lanfeng would move away his disturbing hand.

Li Lanfeng may have been too overwhelmed with emotion; typically extremely observant, he was now unbelievably dense and slow. He did not notice the great distaste in Ling Lan's eyes and continued to grip Ling Lan's arm as he gushed, "That's General Ling Xiao! He's one of our Federation's twelve god-class operators, and also the publicly acknowledged strongest god-class operator in the world. He's the mecha operator I idolise the most... who could have guessed that General Ling Xiao would actually show up here to save us? I must be dreaming... Rabbit, Rabbit, I'm too excited..."

Li Lanfeng could only repeat how excited he was non-stop to the rabbit; this moronic behaviour left Ling Lan speechless. She once again peered at that large hand on her arm and then looked at the dreamy expression on Li Lanfeng's face and his obviously fanatic behaviour... alright, in view of how much the other adored her father, she would tolerate this!

While Ling Lan was bitterly enduring Li Lanfeng's endless fanboy chatter about

General Ling Xiao's greatness, on the outside, Ling Lan's team and the Leiting group were all watching that majestic mecha hovering in the air with emotional faces. Some of them were so moved that they made mistakes in their control, causing their mecha to lose balance and stumble and fall.

However, all this were just trivial things. Everyone knew that the arrival of the god-class operator General Ling Xiao meant that they were all safe now. Well, with the exception of that grandstanding imperial mecha who had been trying to toy with them.

The imperial operator was currently staring in panic at Ling Xiao's mecha; he knew he was in danger now. An imperial mecha was indeed much stronger than an ace mecha, able to bully and kill an ace mecha without too much trouble, but this only applied to ace mecha. Against a god-class mecha, his fate was exactly like if an ace mecha was up against him — there was no room at all for resistance.

When he saw Ling Xiao's mecha once again raise the beam gun in his hands emotionlessly, his expression changed drastically and he immediately activated his external speakers to shout, "Immortal Bird Ling Xiao, please do not take action. As long as you let me go, I will immediately retreat from this battle."

"Let you go? When you were fighting against these cadets, did you ever think of letting them go?" replied Ling Xiao icily. Even though Ling Xiao's reply sounded even and impassive, Ling Lan could still hear the deep rage embedded within it. That mild-mannered and kind father of hers who did not seem to understand the meaning of anger could actually lose his temper like this?

Ling Lan was very intelligent — she quickly figured out why Ling Xiao had become so angry. It was all because of her! Everyone had their own personal buttons which should never be pressed, and one of Ling Xiao's buttons was her, Ling Lan.

What a fearsome daughter-con! Even as Ling Lan sighed at the realization, a warm current flowed gently through her heart. The corners of her lips suddenly quirked upwards, cracking her typically frozen and emotionless face, and this curve was spreading wider and wider...

Li Lanfeng's full attention had been on Ling Xiao, but when he felt the cold aura by his side suddenly turn warm, he turned around in confusion. Thus, he happened to see that once in a blue moon warm smile of Ling Lan's, and the sight was like an arrow to his heart.

"Thump! Thump! Thump!" Li Lanfeng's heart pounded heavily within his ribcage. He reflexively pressed a hand to his chest — could it be that his illness was acting up again? Ever since he had listened to the rabbit seven years ago and begun working hard on his basics, his body had been gradually getting better. The intense pain where he felt as if his heart was about to burst had also slowly lessened until it no longer acted up at all from four years ago. But today, why did he once again have that same sort of feeling?

Could it be that this was an underlying problem that would flare up when his stamina was depleted? After thinking it over long and hard, Li Lanfeng could only come up with this possibility. He hurriedly closed his eyes, no longer daring to look, repeatedly telling himself that he needed to be calm and not get too worked up. Li Lanfeng still remembered that every time his illness flared up, he would always rely on self-abuse to distract himself from the pain coming from deep within him. However, he did not want the rabbit to see this side of him. Although he knew that the rabbit would not look down on him for it, he still did not want to appear weak before the rabbit...

Very soon, his heart stopped its wild and fierce beating, slowly calming back down. Only when his emotions had settled completely did Li Lanfeng open his eyes. His forehead was already coated in sweat — just that brief occurrence had been enough to scare Li Lanfeng greatly.

By now, Ling Lan had returned to her usual demeanour. When a change had come over Li Lanfeng, Ling Lan had immediately sensed it. She had instantly turned to retrieve a restorative agent, but when she saw that Li Lanfeng seemed to have it under control, she decided to wait and observe a little longer; no matter how good a medicinal agent was, ingesting too much of it would result in a certain degree of drug tolerance. Ling Lan did not wish for her companions to overuse medicinal agents and meet a tragic end because they were unable to achieve adequate recovery during critical moments later on.

When she saw that Li Lanfeng's condition was slowly recovering, Ling Lan relaxed. However, she was once again reminded of Li Lanfeng's fragile physical constitution. She made up her mind that, once the battle on planet Newline was over, the first thing she needed to do was to improve Li Lanfeng's physique. She could not allow her team to have a member with a frail and sickly body.

While Li Lanfeng had almost gotten himself into trouble on their end, on the outside the imperial mecha had been rendered speechless by Ling Xiao's question. Ling Xiao

had never considered letting this executioner who had almost harmed his daughter go, and so was not planning to hear any explanations the other could provide. He had barely finished stating his question when he pulled the trigger in his hands without any hesitation. A powerful beam of pale blue light was fired from the muzzle of the beam gun, shooting straight for the imperial operator.

The imperial operator was startled and quickly operated his mecha to evade. At the same time, he turned on his communicator to try and contact his companion, wanting to call the other over to help. However, when his mecha's computer provided feedback that the other party was unreachable, the imperial operator knew that he was in deep trouble.

Ling Xiao was not at all surprised that this attack of his was successfully evaded by the enemy. He had not intended for this shot to kill the enemy to begin with; instead, he had been trying to get the opponent to move further away from his darling daughter's mecha.

Although there were two ace trainee mecha below, knowing his daughter well, Ling Xiao naturally knew that his daughter was most definitely piloting that close combat mecha. And that mecha just so happened to be within the attack range of that imperial mecha. Even as confident as he was, in this kind of scenario, Ling Xiao's first decision was to first save his daughter from any danger — killing the enemy could wait ¹.

At this thought, Ling Xiao could not help but shake his head in silence. If he could help it, he would have wanted his precious daughter to choose a safer long-range attack mecha. With the addition of their Divine Command Sect's spiritual power control, that mecha could definitely become a horrifying mobile attack bastion. Its formidable firepower would guarantee that other mecha would not be able to get close to it, ensuring its survival ability on the battlefield. Although this choice was off the track of becoming a god-class operator, Ling Xiao had never intended for Ling Lan to become a god-class operator anyway. This was not only because Ling Lan was a girl — physical constitution pretty much made it impossible for a girl to become a god-class operator — but more because Ling Xiao knew very well just how much pain and suffering was involved in ascending to god-class status. He could not bear for his daughter to experience it.

This shot of Ling Xiao's had indeed achieved his objective. The imperial operator had no clue that the Federation's strongest god-class operator would value an ace mecha below them so highly — if he had known of Ling Lan's identity, he would definitely

have risked great injury to obtain Ling Lan as a hostage no matter what.

However, other than Ling Lan's original team members who already knew of Ling Lan's and Ling Xiao's relationship, most outsiders did not know anything about this. This once again let Ling Lan sail through a crisis safely.

The imperial operator's retreat put more distance between him and Ling Lan, and Ling Xiao's mecha once again disappeared, only to immediately appear before Ling Lan's mecha. <Belief>'s large body completely obscured Ling Lan's mecha behind it, and only at this moment did Ling Xiao's heart finally settle.

"You can still move, right?" asked Ling Xiao all of a sudden.

"Of course, even another fight would be fine, as long as no such monster like an imperial mecha appears," Ling Lan knew that this question was directed at her, so she instantly replied.

Ling Lan's answer obviously did not hold much awe or deference, which caused Li Lanfeng in the same mecha to be stunned once more. He stared blankly at Ling Lan, wondering how Ling Lan could use this type of attitude in responding to General Ling Xiao.

"Monster? To use this term on an imperial mecha, you think too highly of him." It was unexpected for the generally mild-mannered Ling Xiao to spout this kind of sharp and mocking words. "Let me show you how, before a god-class mecha, all other mecha are ants."

His words had barely faded when Ling Xiao suddenly disappeared from before Ling Lan and he reappeared almost instantaneously beside the imperial mecha. This was the god-class mecha's Divine Wind system in action, truly achieving theoretical instant teleportation.

The god-class mecha <Belief> was a multi-faceted mecha. In other words, it was a legendary mecha whose long-range ability and close-range ability were equally optimized. Compared to the other god-class mecha which were geared more towards close combat, <Belief> was more balanced on all fronts. This was also why <Belief> was renowned to be the strongest god-class mecha.

Thus, Ling Xiao not only had great long-range attack capabilities, he was equally formidable in close-range combat. There was a gleam of cold light, and one of the

imperial mecha's arms was sliced right off. It fell to the ground heavily, creating a shallow ditch with its impact.

"Hmm? Your evasion technique is not bad." Ling Xiao was rather surprised. He had originally intended for this sword to directly pierce the other's cockpit. He was well aware that it was completely impossible for a normal imperial mecha to escape his attack with his speed. Unexpectedly, the opponent's evasive manoeuvres had exceeded the theoretical limits of imperial mecha.

Chapter 387

Unfilial Daughter!

Although the imperial operator had managed to pull a distance away from Ling Xiao and evaded Ling Xiao's sure-kill hit, he was still so nervous that his head was covered in sweat. Earlier, he had thought he was going to die for sure — Ling Xiao's speed had just been too fast; he could not keep up with the other's pace at all. But right at that border of life-or-death, his anchored spiritual power had miraculously loosened and he had undergone a breakthrough. At the moment when the sword would hit him, he had managed to increase his mecha's speed by several times, dodging that sure-kill hit with the barest of margins.

However, he was still a little too late. Even though he had avoided his vital points from being hit, he was unable to avoid the attack completely. In the end, he lost the left arm of his mecha, but the imperial operator was already very satisfied with this outcome. After all, he had still managed to survive the attack of a god-class operator.

Still, the imperial operator was not foolish enough to believe that he could fight toe-to-toe with a god-class operator just because he had achieved a breakthrough in his spiritual power. Even though this breakthrough had elevated his mecha control skills by another level, making it so that he could wield all aspects of his imperial mecha even better than before, at the heart of it, he was still just an imperial operator. He had not advanced to god-class, and no matter how strong an imperial operator became, he would still be no match for a god-class operator...

Thus, there was only one word in his mind — "RUN"! Only by successfully escaping from this god-class operator's hands would he have any future to speak of. This unforeseen improvement in his abilities made him even more eager to find a way to save himself...

Of course, these notions merely passed through the imperial operator's mind in a split second. In the eyes of the spectators, as soon as the imperial mecha's arm had been efficiently chopped off by Ling Xiao, the imperial mecha had instantly chosen to turn and run, flying off at top speed in an attempt to escape. The imperial mecha seemed to be desperate to run away — he pulled out all the stops on his engines, and his mecha

actually shot away like a beam of light, instantly escaping over a kilometre away.

The imperial mecha's flustered demeanour as he escaped shocked Ling Lan's and Qiao Ting's teams greatly. Just think — not too long ago, before Ling Xiao had arrived, how arrogant and haughty the imperial operator had been towards them, treating them as if they were merely a group of ants whose lives were his to snuff out as he wished. Unexpectedly, the imperial mecha who had frightened them so much was actually so pathetic once he was up against General Ling Xiao, only managing to resist for one round before turning tail to run.

Everyone stared fervently at the grand and mighty mecha of Ling Xiao's hovering in the air. When would they be able to reach the level of General Ling Xiao, able to scare the wits out of the enemy just by showing his face?

Qiao Ting's emotions were running high — he could not help but clench his fists. Having been called the second Ling Xiao all this while, would he be as great as General Ling Xiao in the future and become the thirteenth god-class operator of the Federation?

"I will definitely succeed!" Qiao Ting vowed to himself in silence, a glimmer of ambition passing through his eyes.

Seeing the imperial mecha choose to run away in the end, Ling Xiao could not help but snort, his eyes brimming with cold intention. If anyone could see Ling Xiao's expression now, they would certainly be shocked that the always gentle and mild-mannered General Ling Xiao could have such fearsome killing intent. Ling Xiao was not a saint — the moment the opponent's butcher knife had ever threatened the life of his darling daughter, Ling Xiao had never even considered letting him leave with his life.

The air beside Ling Xiao's mecha twisted once more and the massive mecha actually disappeared mysteriously right before the crowd's eyes. In the midst of everyone's bewilderment, Ling Xiao's mecha had already appeared a kilometre or so away to block off the imperial mecha's escape route.

With all of its engines engaged at maximum power, the imperial mecha's speed was already at the limits of an imperial mecha. Three seconds later, the mecha had already gotten several kilometres away from where Ling Xiao was. On his mecha's screens, there was no sign of Ling Xiao's massive mecha in pursuit. The imperial operator's

anxious heart finally settled somewhat. Did this mean that he had already managed to escape?

However, before he left planet Newline for good, the imperial operator would not believe he was truly safe yet. The Divine Wind system of god-class mecha was a heaven-defying existence — if he did not run far enough, he would be easily caught up to by the god-class mecha using its Divine Wind system.

The imperial operator did not slow down his speed, instead pushing his mecha's engines desperately to continue powering forwards. At the same time, he did not forget to send an emergency alert to his companion, the other imperial operator remaining at the dormitory district, to tell him that Ling Xiao was here and to retreat quickly and stop bothering with those Federation troops. The imperial operator knew well that the appearance of a god-class operator meant that they had no chance of winning this battle anymore. He believed that the Empire's commander-in-chief would also agree with their decision; several thousand ace operators were not as important as one imperial operator.

Right then, this imperial operator did not know that his companion had already died by Ling Xiao's hand, that this alert he just sent would never ever be received by the other.

Just then, directly ahead of the imperial mecha, the air suddenly warped to suddenly reveal a large mecha in his path. The other's appearance was too sudden, and the imperial mecha was travelling at its top speed — the ten or so metres between them was not enough for the imperial operator to make any adjustments to his controls to alter his flight path. He could only watch helplessly as his mecha barrelled straight towards Ling Xiao's mecha.

"Bastard!" The imperial mecha knew that a collision was inevitable. A ruthless light appeared in his eyes, and he quickly turned his mecha's beam shield up to its maximum defence setting. Instead of decreasing the power of his engines, he revved them even higher, pushing his mecha's speed another notch higher to send his mecha hurtling towards Ling Xiao like a terrible metal missile.

At the last moment, the dire situation made the imperial mecha decide on an internecine outcome — even if he died, he would bring Ling Xiao along with him!

The opponent's decision merely caused a trace of derision to appear in Ling Xiao's

eyes. He did not dodge, only stating calmly, "Divine Shield system!"

<Belief> received his command and instantly activated the Divine Shield system. The already radiant and beautiful mecha was suddenly covered by a pale blue light all over its body, instantly illuminating the darkness of the night even further...

A tremendous 'boom' rang out as the two mecha collided head on! The intense shockwaves caused by the collision could even be felt by Ling Lan and the other cadets several kilometres away. On the screens of their mecha, the image of the two mecha colliding was played faithfully. Even though their speed was incomparable to that of a god-class mecha, the capture function of their cameras was still extremely powerful, recording this thrilling scene with great precision.

This scene caused everyone's expression to change drastically. Despite knowing in their hearts that General Ling Xiao was sure to be fine, they could not help but worry whether General Ling Xiao would sustain some injuries due to this devastating collision.

Perhaps the heavens wanted to test the hearts of these cadets even further, for before their initial worry could subside, the imperial mecha abruptly exploded. Boom boom boom! Consecutive explosions rang out and the entire night sky was instantly a blanket of smoke. Ling Lan and the rest could only see several fireballs continuing to burn within the thick smoke, which then swiftly plummeted from the skies to crash heavily into the ground.

Some of the fireballs crashed on dry grass, and very soon, the ground was aflame. From a tiny ember, the flames grew till it was a roaring blaze wreathed in thick smoke, where it then finally began to spread rapidly across the ground...

However, right then, no one was paying any attention to the situation on the ground. Ling Lan and the rest were staring anxiously out into the air, waiting for the smoke of that imperial mecha's self-destruction to dissipate. Finally, General Ling Xiao's <Belief> once again emerged before the group. The mecha hovered in the air, steady and immovable. The bright blue glow surrounding its outer shell was completely unchanged, and the twelve wings behind it were just as radiant and eye-catching as they were at the start.

All this proved that the impact of an imperial mecha's intentional collision and the force from its self-destruction was not enough to cause any damage to a god-class

mecha! Everyone present could not help but be astounded at the sight — as expected of the acknowledged strongest ultimate weapon of the human world. Imperial mecha one level lower than it was nothing before it.

"So this is god-class mecha!" They all looked at the god-class mecha with impassioned eyes. All their awe and exclamations were finally condensed into this one sentence. <Belief>'s monstrous power had been deeply reflected in their hearts; it became their lifelong goal from this point onwards.

Very soon, Ling Xiao operated his mecha to return to Ling Lan. He slowly descended to the ground, looking down at the mecha his daughter was piloting as he did so, and his heart twinged in pain.

The outer shell of the ace mecha Ling Lan was piloting was currently covered in scars. These battle scars proved that his baby daughter had experienced several battles already within this period of time. His precious daughter who should have grown up wilfully beneath his wings, had to act like a man because of him and rely on her own skills to seek survival on the cruel battlefield...

This was all because of his incompetence as a father! If only he had not fallen for that trap 16 years ago, then his precious daughter would not have had to live such a hard life. For the first time, Ling Xiao registered deeply that he had done something wrong. He even imagined what if he had rushed here only to find that his daughter had already met some great misfortune... Ling Xiao could not help but shudder. He absolutely could not allow such a thing to happen, or else he would never be able to forgive himself for the rest of his life.

"General Ling Xiao, so glad to meet you!" Ling Xiao's silence made Ling Lan feel rather awkward, and she also did not want to have an emotional father-daughter reunion right here on this brutal battlefield, so she took the initiative to set the scene.

"General Ling Xiao?!" The way Ling Lan had addressed him caused all of the self-remonstration deep in Ling Xiao's heart to scatter. He felt his teeth and gums aching, wishing dearly that he could grind them against something... was he only going to hear his daughter call him 'General Ling Xiao' after rushing here over several hundred thousand li? This unfilial daughter!

Is it so difficult to call me 'daddy' just once? Ling Xiao forcibly suppressed the urge to blurt out this question with much effort, stiffly turning it into a different question. "Hn,

can you still continue to fight?" He could not bear to push his daughter; after all, he was the one who owed his daughter, having been absent for 16 years of her life. The time before them was still long — one day, he would have his baby daughter willingly call him 'daddy'! Ling Xiao vowed silently to himself.

"Of course!" Ling Xiao's question made Ling Lan sigh in relief. She had really been worried that Ling Xiao would be displeased with her form of address and expose their relationship... alright, Ling Lan was still somewhat unaccustomed to having such an awesome and impressive dad. Sometimes, when a father was too outstanding, it was a lot of pressure on the child.

Chapter 388

Weak!

Ling Lan's team members who knew about General Ling Xiao's relationship with their boss also knew that this father-son pair was rather strange in their interactions. They definitely did not give off the typical intimate feeling other father-son pairs did. Therefore, the members were not too surprised by their boss's impassive reaction.

Meanwhile, Li Lanfeng and Li Shiyu had no clue about Ling Lan and Ling Xiao's relationship. Even though they were rather surprised at how Ling Lan could keep so calm in the presence of the military's idol General Ling Xiao, when they considered how Ling Lan was perpetually cold and unemotional, they no longer thought anything of it. They just took it as a personality issue of Ling Lan and did not suspect anything else.

Ling Lan's calm and toneless response was followed by a beat of silence — Ling Xiao suddenly did not know what kind of attitude he should use when treating his baby daughter now. If he used the tone of a superior speaking to a subordinate, even if he could bear to do so, if his wife Lan Luofeng found out, he would definitely meet no good end... if he acted a little more intimate, he wondered whether this would irritate his daughter, because his daughter's behaviour indicated that she did not want to reveal their relationship and expose her identity.

Ling Xiao once again felt it profoundly — it was truly very difficult to be a satisfactory father for a daughter ¹...

Right at that moment, Qiao Ting on the other end had also operated his mecha over, bringing his faction members in tow. He came up to stand beside Ling Lan and said excitedly, "General Ling Xiao, hello. I am a 4th-year cadet of the First Men's Military Academy, Qiao Ting. It's nice to meet you." His words were similar in meaning to Ling Lan's greeting at the start, but compared to Ling Lan's cold indifference, Qiao Ting's tone of voice was obviously much warmer and more excited.

Ling Xiao turned his head to look at this ace trainee mecha who had come forwards uninvited. He knew that this must be one of the outstanding students of the military academy — mind you, for a 4th-year cadet to have already advanced to ace operator

status was extremely rare, as rare as phoenix feathers and qilin horns. And so, he operated his mecha to give Qiao Ting a nod in response.

This attitude of Ling Xiao's was exceedingly normal. Even though Qiao Ting was an outstanding cadet, Ling Xiao had seen more than his fair share of this type of talent. At his current level, Qiao Ting was not yet able to gain Ling Xiao's acknowledgement. As one of the twelve god-class operators of the Federation, one of the ten great generals, Ling Xiao's standards were undoubtedly very high.

However, having a comparison, Qiao Ting did not think so. They were both cadets piloting trainee mecha, but Ling Xiao's attitude when treating the other ace operator was obviously warmer. This made Qiao Ting feel a little unhappy; he felt he was being treated coldly. In the military academy, the instructors had high hopes for him and the other students gathered around him like stars around the moon. Thus, he naturally felt that he had the right to garner the same treatment as the other ace operator...

Ling Xiao naturally knew nothing of these little thoughts running through Qiao Ting's mind. Right then, his daughter was the only thing he could see. If not for the strangers around, Ling Xiao would have directly pried Ling Lan's mecha open so that he could see for himself that his daughter was truly safe and unharmed. However, Ling Xiao was after all Ling Xiao. He knew that in this situation, he could not do as he wished. In order to find out his daughter's true condition, Ling Xiao decided to put a swift end to the battle.

Thus, he said, "After regrouping, head for the dormitory district immediately!" That said, Ling Xiao's giant mecha once again disappeared from the group's sight, leaving no trace behind. If not for the roaring flames left behind by the fall of the imperial mecha, everyone could have imagined that General Ling Xiao's presence here had merely been a wishful dream.

Seeing Ling Xiao leave, Ling Lan let out a mental sigh of relief. At this time, Little Four finally leapt out from the little black room he had been confined to and shouted indignantly, "Boss, you're a coward! Not even daring to call out 'daddy'! I look down on you!" It turned out that Ling Lan was afraid that Little Four would be too excited at seeing Ling Xiao and affect her emotional balance, and so had shut Little Four up in that little black room when Ling Xiao had approached her.

Ling Lan said helplessly, "This is a battlefield. It's not appropriate for me to call him that here."

"I'm not listening, not listening! You're just afraid and cowardly! Are you ashamed of having Ling Xiao as your daddy?" Little Four covered his ears, showing that he would not accept any of Ling Lan's explanations. Instead, he continued to question Ling Lan with an even angrier tone.

"How could I be ashamed of that? I'm very proud to be Ling Xiao's daughter! I'm just more afraid that I'll disgrace Ling Xiao," Ling Lan told Little Four bitterly, her expression a little lost.

The reason why she could accept the virtual world Ling Xiao was that she understood that that Ling Xiao was fake — it was only a remnant spiritual imprint. Thus, she could let her emotions run free and call the other 'daddy' without reservations, and the other's reaction was just as she had expected, immensely happy and content. And that was all — things ended there, and there was no future to worry about.

But now things were different. The present Ling Xiao was a real person. He had feelings, he possessed all seven emotions and six desires — he might accept her now with his selfless fatherly love, but he could also become disappointed in the future, and become angry and hate her... Ling Lan was afraid that once she accepted Ling Xiao, she would become weak and start hoping for even more.

Over these past 16 years, in order to support the burden of the entire Ling family on her shoulders, Ling Lan had already learned how to be strong and independent, accustomed to handling everything on her own. Ling Xiao's return changed everything she had already gotten used to, and this made Ling Lan somewhat panicked.

What flustered Ling Lan even more was Ling Xiao's full berth of fatherly love. He displayed it so obviously, and the enthusiasm and intensity of it were so distinctly different from her father's demeanour in her previous life; her past father's eyes had always been full of fatigue and weariness. This was another reason why Ling Lan had been avoiding the issue, unable to examine her true emotions too closely.

Yes, it wasn't that Ling Lan did not want to accept Ling Xiao; she was just afraid that one day in the future, those love-filled eyes of Ling Xiao would also end up filled with distaste and weariness... Ling Lan did not want to experience that kind of hurt ever again. It was just as Little Four had said — weak, she pushed away Ling Xiao's overflowing fatherly love again and again, even though she knew that her response would hurt Ling Xiao a little.

"Like this, can I become a daughter Ling Xiao would be satisfied with?" Ling Lan asked Little Four with a sad smile. Already trained to be a cold-blooded and ruthless killer by the learning space, she could no longer be that soft and gentle, sweet and adorable little girl in Ling Xiao's mind's eye.

Little Four was taken aback by Ling Lan's question, and then his entire face collapsed into a deep frown. He found that what his boss had said was not wrong. Already used to seeing his boss's cold, fierce, and domineering demeanour, Little Four really could not imagine her acting like a petite and sweet young miss instead. Thus, Little Four consoled her with a face full of regret, "Boss, my condolences!"

Ling Lan wordlessly flicked Little Four's forehead and then ignored Little Four's woeful eyes of condemnation. Somewhat dejectedly, she said, "I can only take things one step at a time. If..." She did not finish her sentence. One day, if she managed to overcome the barriers in her heart, perhaps she would be able to call Ling Xiao 'daddy'.

Ling Lan very quickly gathered her emotions. Turning to check on her team, after she found that they were all unharmed, she moved to lead her team back to the dormitory district. Ling Lan knew well that her father must have already gone ahead to wrap things up there.

Just then, Qiao Ting, who had similarly finished settling matters with his team, called out to her, "Please wait!"

"Something the matter?" Ling Lan paused and turned her head to ask. At the critical moment, Qiao Ting did not choose to abandon his companions and subordinates — this had turned Ling Lan's impression of Qiao Ting favourable.

"May I ask, which year and specialization you are from?" Qiao Ting really wanted to know who this other ace operator was. Who exactly was this person who had also managed to advance to ace operator like him?

Qiao Ting's question caused Ling Lan to quirk a brow, but she did not answer.

Ling Lan's silence made Qiao Ting even more unhappy. His frustration and disappointment at being treated coldly by Ling Xiao rushed to his head and he found himself blurting out, "Do you know General Ling Xiao?" Or else why would General Ling Xiao treat you so warmly yet treat me with such cold indifference? This was the

only reason Qiao Ting could come up with during this short period of time.

Ling Lan could not help but laugh at his question. No matter how cool she had tried to play it, Ling Xiao's behaviour had still raised some flags. For some reason, Ling Lan suddenly felt really happy — though initially she had not planned on answering, her good mood prompted her to ask in return, "Could it be that you don't know General Ling Xiao?"

Ling Lan's question rendered Qiao Ting instantly speechless. Mind you, in the Federation, aside from those newborn children who knew nothing, as long as one was a mentally aware Huaxian, there was no way one did not know General Ling Xiao. As such, Qiao Ting's previous question was a rather silly one.

Qiao Ting was just about to change the phrasing of his question when he heard Ling Lan say evenly, "General Ling Xiao ordered us to head to the dormitory district immediately. I think that, General Ling Xiao probably would not want us to dawdle."

Ling Lan's words caused Qiao Ting's heart to clench in fright. He swallowed his questions and looked searchingly at the ace trainee mecha before him for a moment before turning to order his faction members to head swiftly for the dormitory district.

Watching the disappearing figures of Qiao Ting's group, Li Lanfeng, who had been silent all this while, asked, "Rabbit, are we leaving it like this?" Qiao Ting's previous overbearing and impolite behaviour had seriously ruffled Li Lanfeng's feathers — though of course this was also because Li Lanfeng already had some negative bias against Qiao Ting to begin with, so all of Qiao Ting's improper behaviour was magnified endlessly in his eyes.

"We'll clash again in the future. Leiting will not forget the grudge established this year. In at most two years' time, they will challenge us again." A smirk appeared on Ling Lan's lips. Qiao Ting's refusal to act against his companions had indeed improved Ling Lan's opinion of him, but she also deeply disliked the inherently overbearing and haughty side of him.

It should be said that Ling Lan had also cultivated a robust air of dominance from her training in the learning space. However, her dominance was deeply embedded in her bones and was not waved about on the outside. As such, regarding Qiao Ting who was equally dominant, she naturally felt slightly repelled — this was perhaps the logic behind the theory of keeping kings away from each other ².

Ling Lan's words made Li Lanfeng recall that time a while back when the New Cadet Regiment had gone up against Leiting in an arena battle. He knew that Leiting would definitely enact their plan for revenge when the time was right, and so he said, "When it's time for the mecha fight, count me in."

Ling Lan was surprised. "Aren't you part of Wuji?"

Li Lanfeng chuckled and said, "We're just collaborators. Wuji will not be comfortable letting us external allies join them." Just like Zhao Jun, who was also excluded from the group. Li Lanfeng rubbed his jaw as he suddenly thought, '*Perhaps next year, he could also lure Zhao Jun over...*'³

Zhao Jun, who was currently hiding in the dormitory district, suddenly felt a chill run down his spine. He anxiously checked his surroundings, but other than cadets, he could only see more cadets. There was no sign of any danger at all. He scratched his head in confusion, unsure where that sense of danger had come from...

Chapter 389

Li Yinfei!

By the time Ling Lan and the others arrived at the dormitory district, the entire battlefield had already entered the end stages of clean-up. Ling Xiao, hovering in the air, was like a large mountain to the invaders, pressing down on them till they could not even breathe. On top of that, if anyone tried anything, a beam from Ling Xiao would strike them down mercilessly, killing them instantly.

This type of combat power had sapped away all the fight in the intruders. The only reason why they had not put down their weapons and surrendered yet was that they still held on to that last thread of hope in their hearts. They were praying that their fleet in space would descend on planet Newline to shoot Ling Xiao down and rescue them.

Of course, they were disappointed in the end, because the ground forces sent them the images captured by their satellite after their signal communications were restored. These images showed them that their last hope was currently under attack on all sides, surrounded by the four Federation fleets which had come to provide reinforcements, unable to even protect itself. Thus, they stopped hoping for a miracle, put down their weapons, and surrendered to become prisoners of the Huaxia Federation.

Without the help of a starship, mecha of imperial level and below had no way of breaking free of gravity by themselves to return to space. ¹ Therefore, if they did not surrender, their final outcome would be to die here on the battlefield. Not everyone could view death with equanimity. Thus, when the first person laid down his weapon, everyone else followed suit, which finally marked the end of this battle sparked by an air invasion.

The ground forces very quickly took the prisoners who had surrendered into custody, and then they began clearing up the battlefield as they searched for any survivors. Meanwhile, after a brief period of panic and chaos, the dormitory district also began their own rescue efforts under the lead of the instructors. That shot by the imperial operator had caused a great number of casualties among the cadets. For a time, the

entire military academy was plunged into a sad and depressing atmosphere.

The fighting on the ground had come to an end, but the fighting in space was still in full swing. The four fleets had arrived so quickly at planet Newline all because of Ling Xiao.

As Ling Xiao had piloted <Belief> to rush towards planet Newline, he had also sent out a request for assistance to the four large fleets. Although Ling Xiao had not known for sure back then what exactly was going on on planet Newline, with how Ling Lan had notified him, Ling Xiao believed that the situation on planet Newline must already be very bad. At first, Ling Xiao had suspected that the horrifying demon beasts around planet Newline had begun to rampage, so he had wanted to let the four large fleets help evacuate the cadets from the planet to ensure their safety.

This was truly a stroke of luck — as soon as Ling Xiao arrived in the space of planet Newline, he noticed countless unidentified starships and immediately knew that this must be an invasion. Ling Xiao thought of the four fleets on their way, and since he was also very worried about his daughter's safety, he decided to ignore these starships, sneaking by right under their noses to fly into planet Newline. It had to be said that god-class mecha were indeed truly frightening. They were able to completely conceal their own signals and images, preventing them from being picked up by the radars of many starships; thus, he was able to sneak into planet Newline completely undetected.

The final outcome was that the enemy starship fleet was totally annihilated under the combined attack of the four Federation fleets. Even though some of the starships managed to escape from the blockade to run from the planet Newline sector, they were chased down in a frenzy by the four large fleets.

It had to be said that the invasion of planet Newline, which was an attempt to kill off the Federation's future seeds of hope, had utterly crossed the line of all of the upper echelons of the Federation. Whether it be the government or the military, no matter which faction they were from, they all issued the kill order. Even though the factions harboured all sorts of conflicts of interests, they still shared the common goal of protecting the future of the Federation. Therefore, everyone chose the same way of handling things, and that was to use bloody means to keep the surrounding countries in line via fear, telling them that the Huaxia Federation was not as easy to provoke as they thought.

In the end, this invasion ended with the complete annihilation of the intruders.

However, the casualties of planet Newline were severe enough to shock the Federation government and the military. Over half of the ground forces were sacrificed in the battle, and almost all of the various mecha squads were crippled by their losses as well. What saddened them even more was that out of a hundred thousand cadets, eight thousand had died in this battle. These cadets had all been excellent seedlings for the various military positions in the future, but before they could even debut on the battlefield, they had already lost their wings here in the military academy. This was their fault as the older generation.

For such a large fleet to have infiltrated the Federation deep enough to seek out and come to planet Newline, there was no doubt that something must have gone wrong with some departments within the Federation. The price paid in blood spurred the government and the military to no longer take things easy — the president and the three grand marshals of the military signed a joint order to clean out the spies and secret agents hiding within the ranks. Even some parasites who had disregarded national interests for their own personal gain were also cleared out in the process.

This operation was called Operation Bloodstain. The severity of the methods employed left those spies and secret agents fortunate enough to escape discovery frightened and jumping at shadows, not daring to act any further in the interim. This allowed the Federation to have unusual smooth-sailing in the subsequent battles for revenge, and the Federation quickly harvested the fruits of triumph in battle.

Of course, regarding Ling Xiao's appearance at planet Newline, military headquarters had many questions. After all, Ling Xiao should have been busy establishing the 23rd Division several thousand light-years away — why had he appeared at planet Newline at that time? However, Ling Xiao's appearance had been extremely timely, and his command to gather the four large fleets had also been extremely accurate. This had salvaged the situation, preventing the Federation from a loss of at least five generations of potential talent.

This result was a great relief and comfort to the president and the three grand marshals of the Federation; as such, the feat certainly qualified as extraordinary merit. However, they still summoned Ling Xiao back for an inquiry. When they found out that Ling Xiao had snuck into the military academy undercover out of worry for how his son was getting along in the school, they all burst out into laughter.

They laughed at Ling Xiao for being overly attached to his son, but were also very glad that Ling Xiao had rushed over to planet Newline because of that. The president and

the three great marshals were well aware that if Ling Xiao had not been there, this invasion would definitely have ended up in favour of the enemy. At that time, what they would have received would have been news of the complete annihilation of the First Men's Military Academy. And the result of this outcome would inevitably have been their resignation, for only that would be able to extinguish the rage of the people.

Still, even with Ling Xiao's involvement, the casualties among the cadets had reached as high as eight thousand... Luckily, the government's crisis unit was very efficient, adeptly turning the public's focus onto the enemy, with especial emphasis on the several thousand prisoners they had captured. When they found out that many nations had participated in this air invasion, there was an immediate public outcry. The voices of anti-war sentiment instantly vanished without a trace, and the public enlistment rate which had been steadily declining by the year increased by leaps and bounds within that month.

The president and the military were instantly relieved. Subsequently, in order to pacify the angry public, the president and the three great marshals finally came to a consensus — they gave the order to launch a full offensive on the Duolan Alliance, which was the weakest nation among the members of the invading enemy alliance the Federation had been able to identify through their investigation.

Perhaps afraid that the Federation would expose their doings and affect their grand image of being a supreme nation, the Dosa Empire ² unexpectedly kept their silence in the face of the Huaxia Federation's attack on Duolan. Meanwhile, though the Huaxia Federation clearly knew that the primary culprit was the Dosa Empire, out of fear that the entire human world would be once again dragged into a world war as soon as their two nations clashed, the Huaxia Federation chose once more to endure this slight, determined to extract their pound of flesh from Dosa's accomplices instead.

Just when the Federation retaliated against Duolan, "Tranquil Night", a requiem for the innocent cadets who had died in the battle, spread rapidly from within the virtual world. Perhaps because the lyrics resonated with the sorrow in the hearts of the cadets and those family members who had lost someone in the battle, and also due to its sad melody which carried undertones of strength and resilience, the singer of said song instantly became the favourite singer of the academy cadets...

Without support from the Dosa Empire, and without internal spies to leak the military tactics of the Federation, the Federation's attack on Duolan proceeded smoothly. One month later, the Duolan Alliance was utterly razed and Duolan was officially claimed

as Federation territory. This victory caused the Federation to descend into wild celebration, and the lingering grief from the air invasion was significantly eased.

In the meantime, after a month's time, not only was the rage of the military and the public slowly subsiding, within the restored First Men's Military Academy, the initial grief and rage suffusing the campus were slowly fading back to calm. The anger, fright, and worry in every students' eyes were also gradually settling into calm as well, and smiles began to appear on the cadets' faces again.

"Boss, great news! Great news!" Early in the morning, Xie Yi flew down the stairs with a face full of excitement. He should have just gotten up and must not have taken the time to wash up, for his entire appearance was extremely dishevelled. Xie Yi did not notice Ling Lan scrunch up her brow slightly at his appearance as he shouted at her loudly in excitement over the breakfast table.

Ling Lan was unimpressed by his fervour. She lifted the white napkin by her side to dab at her lips before setting it down on the table. Only then did she look up to glance sharply at him.

At his boss's cold and fierce gaze and expression, Xie Yi instantly woke up from his buzzing excitement. He swiftly lowered his head, no longer daring to make such a fuss.

Witnessing Xie Yi being shut down, Qi Long, who was sitting at one side, began to snicker. Han Jiyun wordlessly nudged him, reminding him to leave Xie Yi some face, while Luo Lang threw a cold glance over at Xie Yi like Ling Lan had — whatever Boss disliked, he disliked as well.

As for Lin Zhong-qing, he did not raise his head but continued to focus on his breakfast. It had nothing to do with him after all; Xie Yi had brought this all on himself. Fine, when it was just them on their own, Ling Lan's team was not as united and loving as they appeared outside. Whenever there was a chance, the members would absolutely step on each other while they were down.

"Tell me then, what exactly is this great news that has gotten you so excited," said Ling Lan calmly when she saw that Xie Yi had been sufficiently cowed.

Hearing this, Xie Yi knew that his boss was not truly angry, and his interrupted enthusiasm reared up once again. "Boss, Li Yinfei is coming to our school!"

"Li Yinfei?" Ling Lan's brow furrowed. Who was this again ³?

"What?! Li Yinfei is coming? Is that for real?" Before Ling Lan could recall who this person was, Qi Long had already exclaimed in excitement, "Xie Yi, how did you find out about this?"

"Just now I went onto the academy forums, and the moment I logged on, I saw this news. Everyone is excited by it right now." Sensing a fellow fan, Xie Yi's excitement was further amplified.

Han Jijyun and Luo Lang shared a look, also unable to recall at that moment who this Li Yinfei was that had Qi Long and Xie Yi so excited.

Beside them, Lin Zhong-qing set down his chopsticks and said softly, "Tranquil Night!"

"Ah, it's her?!" Luo Lang cried out instantly. Just recently, he had also been very obsessed with this song.

Chapter 390

Decadent Voice!

Han Jijyun also came to a realisation. It had to be said that 'Tranquil Night' was indeed a divine song — its singer, Li Yinfei, had instantly ascended from being an unknown singer to soulful diva. Her rise had truly been meteoric. Even more admirable was the fact that she had purely intended to sing a requiem to comfort the souls of the fallen, and thus had never revealed her true face to the public. She was only known by her voice for now.

"Why did she suddenly choose to come to our school?" Han Jijyun was also extremely curious about Li Yinfei.

Xie Yi replied, "A while back, wasn't the Federation citizens clamouring for Li Yinfei to show her face? Due to public pressure, Li Yinfei's management company finally chose the First Men's Military Academy as the performance venue for the debut of Li Yinfei's true appearance. That's why, the ninth day of the next month is the time when Li Yinfei will take the stage in person at the military academy. We'll be the first men to ever see her true face...!" Xie Yi could not hold back his excitement at this point and began to howl like a wolf.

His words received Qi Long's hearty agreement. So, in no mood to continue eating, Qi Long left his half-eaten breakfast to run upstairs to log into the virtual world and started looking up any news he could on Li Yinfei.

Qi Long and the others' conversation enlightened the initially befuddled Ling Lan. She had heard 'Tranquil Night' before, and it was indeed an excellent song. Little Four had once analysed it before, and had come to the conclusion that the singer must be someone with an awakened innate talent. The talent she had awakened should be Decadent Voice — it could make it much easier for her to bring the audience into the emotional realm of any song she sang — so Li Yinfei's success was to be expected. Of course, both the melody and lyrics of the song were equally worthy of being considered classic. The combination of these multiple factors culminated in the legend of Li Yinfei.

"What a bunch of green youths," sighed Ling Lan mentally. Although 'Tranquil Night'

was indeed extremely mellifluous and touching under the accentuation of Li Yinfei's Decadent Voice, as Ling Lan's spiritual power was extremely strong, she was not as affected and was not as crazy and obsessed with the song as Qi Long and the rest.

Very soon, under Qi Long, Xie Yi, and the others' eager anticipation, Li Yinfei's first live concert officially opened at the academy's stadium. Qi Long and Xie Yi made an executive decision — without notifying their boss, they bought tickets for the entire team. It should be known that Ling Lan had no interest at all in going to the concert with a bunch of men to idolise a female singer...

Of course, after Qi Long and Xie Yi did such a stupid thing, they were also afraid that their boss would settle the score with them later. Thus, they cunningly argued that this was a team activity for Ling Lan's team, and that the both of them would sponsor the funds for it. As the boss, Ling Lan needed to take the lead and participate as well so that she did not hurt the team members' fragile little hearts.

Ling Lan thought about it and found that she had nothing much to do on that day; furthermore, she had yet to see what a live concert in this world was like. Out of curiosity, she agreed to lead the team to experience the concert in person.

It had to be said that Qi Long and Xie Yi had carried out their plan well. Heaven knows what methods they used, but they had actually managed to obtain great seats in the fifth row right in front of the stage. Meanwhile, the few rows before them were taken up by the top ranking people of the various major factions in the academy. Thunder King Qiao Ting of the Leiting Mecha Clan had also shown up and was seated in the second row.

As for the first row, it was of course filled up by the top brass of the academy along with the instructors. Li Yinfei's decision to hold her first live concert at the military academy was extremely welcomed by the administrators. After all, everyone knew that the song 'Tranquil Night' had been specially produced for the innocent cadets who had died in the invasion. Li Yinfei's choice to hold the concert here showed her respect for the First Men's Military Academy.

Ling Lan had just taken a seat when Li Lanfeng, who had been following right behind her all this while, reacted the swiftest, immediately snatching one of the seats beside Ling Lan. Luo Lang was not to be outdone. Although he was a step slower, he still managed to snatch the other seat beside Ling Lan. Thus, the two of them were like the door gods Heng and Ha ¹, securely framing Ling Lan on the left and right.

Although Qi Long and the rest also wanted to sit beside Ling Lan, being a beat slower than Li Lanfeng and Luo Lang, they could only rub their noses in resignation at this result and sulkily choose some other place to sit.

Only Li Shiyu and Chang Xinyuan were trailing behind the team with morose faces. The both of them were obsessed with research and had no interest in whatever so-called singer. They felt that, instead of being so idle as to come here and waste time, they might as well have stayed in their own labs and continued to work on their own topics of research.

However, Ling Lan had said that this was a clan event and no one was allowed to be absent. Hence, the two of them had no choice but to compromise and pry themselves out of their labs for this excursion. Still, even so, brimming with reluctance, they had naturally dragged their feet till they were at the very rear of the team. Only after everyone had taken a seat did they settle down in the two outermost empty seats. However, they were soon engrossed in their own research again. Even though they had left their labs and the environment here was indeed rather terrible, this would not affect their calculations of certain formulae...

The whole audience waited eagerly for Li Yinfei to take the stage. Finally, the time came and all the lights turned dim. Everyone involuntarily began to scream and cheer in loud fervour, because they all knew that the concert was about to officially begin...

*'On one particular tranquil night'...*a clear voice softly crooned in the large stadium. With no lights, in a shroud of darkness, this voice sank even more deeply into everyone's souls. The initially passionate cheers began to decrease in volume, until the scene was finally completely silent. Led by the singing, all of the cadets were brought back to that night once more, that intense and violent battle, and the helplessness they had felt at the time once again descended upon them. The entire venue became still and silent — everyone was silently mourning their innocent schoolmates and companions who had died that night...

"Listening to Li Yinfei sing live, it's even clearer how powerful the other's Decadent Voice is." Little Four finally could not help but emerge to say. He had never seen such a powerful manifestation of innate talent powers before; it was actually able to control the emotions of the entire audience of forty to fifty thousand people.

"It is indeed very powerful. There's really no way to defend against this Decadent Voice!" Although Ling Lan knew the other was using an innate talent, she still felt that

Li Yinfei's singing was very beautiful, making her unwilling to resist. This feeling made Ling Lan frown silently. If someone used this type of ability to try and influence her decisions, would she fall for it?

"Because Decadent Voice is not an attack-type ability, she belongs to the natural series of power users. As long as the user has no evil intentions, no one would bother defending against it." Little Four was pulling up all the relevant information in his databases as he explained, "Just like your leopard. He also has a similar type of innate talent, which will cause others to unconsciously think well of him. As long as he doesn't have any evil intentions against you, everything's fine."

Little Four's words made Ling Lan turn reflexively to look at Li Lanfeng, only for her to find that Li Lanfeng's brow was tightly furrowed, as if he didn't really like Li Yinfei's singing. What was up with that? Ling Lan was extremely puzzled. Mind you, even Li Shiyu and Chang Xinyuan who had been mired in their research at the start had been involuntarily pulled out of their research the moment Li Yinfei had started to sing. They were now just as enraptured by the singer's Decadent Voice as the others.

Ling Lan's puzzlement was immediately picked up by Little Four. He too felt it was rather strange, so he began searching manically through his databases again. Three seconds later, he finally found a so-called research hypothesis. "Boss, according to the databases, similar innate talents might repel each other. Li Yinfei's Decadent Voice and your leopard's innate talent might be somewhat different, but their final manifestations are extremely similar. Could it be that their innate talents have this sort of mutually repelling nature?"

"Highly probable. Well, that's fine. At least if we ever meet this kind of person again, there will be someone on the team who can keep a clear mind." Ling Lan believed this was a good thing. She did not want to have her emotions affected without clear reason, to the extent that she might even change her decisions unwisely. At this point, Ling Lan suddenly recalled when her dad had first laid eyes on the leopard. The corners of her lips curved involuntarily, and there was a trace of laughter in her eyes.

No matter how powerful one's innate talent was, there would always be someone who would not be taken in by it. Li Lanfeng's innate talent made others relax their guard unconsciously around him and feel like getting closer to him, but this innate talent was utterly useless against her dad Ling Xiao, and even had a reverse effect. Compared to the others, like Li Shiyu and the rest of her team, her dad was able to treat them kindly and agreeably. However, when it came to Li Lanfeng, her dad's face had been an icy

tundra, and he had completely ignored Li Lanfeng. This hurt Li Lanfeng considerably, unsure what he had done to displease General Ling Xiao...

Could it be that her dad also had a similar awakened innate talent as the leopard? So the two of them sensed some mutual rejection? Considering the fact that her dad was a national idol, Ling Lan felt that this hypothesis was very likely to be true...

Right then, Ling Lan could not know that Ling Xiao did not like Li Lanfeng purely because Li Lanfeng had crawled out from Ling Lan's mecha at the time they had first met. No father would not react well to a boy who had randomly appeared by his daughter's side and seemed intimate with her.

"Actually, this type of ability only carries a hint of suggestion. It won't really cause any dramatic influential effect. Otherwise, the Federation government would not just let these singers and performers with these innate talents move around freely. It's clear to see that the government considers these people safe ²." Little Four used the facts to inform his boss that the powers of these individuals were not as formidable as she thought they were.

"War will always bring great harm, and these innate talent users can help console the sorrow of the masses. The Federation needs them." Little Four's explanation let Ling Lan come to an understanding immediately. She knew why the government would promote these singers and performers — they could skilfully dampen the public's anti-war sentiments. It should be said that the methods of the Federation government in this time was already very sophisticated. It made full use of every person in its reach, making it so that everyone served the machinations of war.

At the end of the lovely yet mournful 'Tranquil Night', the cadets were still immersed in their emotions when, suddenly, a lamp lit up in the centre of the stage, and a graceful silhouette slowly rose from a platform in the centre. It went without saying that this was the singer everyone had been waiting for, Li Yinfei. Everyone was instantly shaken out of their stupor and began to scream and shout uncontrollably. The initially calm cadets reverted to their original age at this time, becoming wild and fanatical.

"Thank you, everyone, for coming to see my concert. I'm very happy. I had originally only wanted to give the souls of those innocent cadets who had died some peace and comfort, which is why I composed this song 'Tranquil Night'. I never expected this song to be so loved by you all. I'm grateful for the support and attention. Next, I would like to dedicate a new song of mine to all of you —— 'Never Give In!'"

Li Yinfei's voice was extremely lovely, soft and gentle with a trace of warmth running through it. Even a sad song like 'Tranquil Night' still held that share of irrepressible warmth despite its deep sorrow. Of course, right then, without the sad tone from the first song in her voice, the warmth in Li Yinfei's voice was all the more apparent.

Chapter 391

The Same Face...

Accompanying Li Yinfei's voice, all the stage lights turned to focus on her body, allowing everyone to see Li Yinfei's figure clearly. However, this was soon followed by deep sighs from the entire venue. It turned out that Li Yinfei's face was currently covered by a thin veil through which only a pair of exquisitely charming slanted almond-shaped eyes could be seen. The play of lights and shifting of emotion in those eyes actually conveyed an erotic allure — even without having seen her face, everyone could tell that this Li Yinfei was most certainly a stunning enchantress.

When the song "Never Give In" began to play, Li Yinfei once again touched the hearts of the cadets. This song was extremely powerful and Li Yinfei sang it with passion, as if telling the cadets that the enemy's invasion would never break the Huaxians' iron bones ¹. Stirred up by the singing, everyone present rose to their feet. All the cadets clenched their fists emotionally, loudly joining in when the line 'never give in' appeared in the chorus segments.

By this point, no matter how thick Ling Lan was, she knew that this Li Yinfei was bound to be part of the military. Otherwise, it was unlikely that both her songs would cater so closely to this battle of the military academy. The military had truly planned this well — Li Yinfei's arrival and these two songs would inevitably fan the cadets' hatred towards the intruders to an extreme. It could be conceived that all the cadets here would become the central supporters in fighting back against these intruders in the future.

Right at that final moment, at the crescendo of the song, Li Yinfei ripped off the veil on her face, revealing her peerless face... all of the cadets who had been loudly singing 'never give in' earlier abruptly fell silent. In that instant, they had truly been shocked silent by Li Yinfei's peerless beauty.

This was Li Yinfei — leaving aside her enthralling voice, she also possessed a peerless face capable of bewitching the masses!

Li Yinfei's true appearance stunned everyone present. In the second row, Qiao Ting, whose face was initially composed, felt his heartbeat speed up when he saw Li Yinfei's

true face. He could not suppress a surge of desire in his heart, thinking, *"This is a woman worthy of me. I must get her!"*

Li Yinfei's peerless beauty similarly startled Ling Lan. As another girl, Ling Lan had actually been attracted for a moment by Li Yinfei's face as well. However, Ling Lan was a girl after all, and combined with all the insane torments of Instructor Number Five in the learning space, Ling Lan's heart had been trained to be extremely tough and cold. She would not be easily bewitched.

After calming down, when Ling Lan once again gazed at Li Yinfei's face which was beautiful enough to topple cities, she noticed that that face made her feel somewhat ill at ease. Even though it was exquisitely beautiful, exquisitely alluring, even worthy of being called peerless and unmatched, for some reason, Ling Lan just felt that there was something off about it. There was just some natural grace missing — what exactly was this about?

Ling Lan's brow was lightly furrowed. Just as she was mulling over the issue, Li Lanfeng by her side suddenly began trembling uncontrollably. Not only that, his two hands, which he had placed on top of his knees, also began to tremble uncontrollably...

Ling Lan's heart clenched. She could not help but recall the air invasion when Li Lanfeng had been sitting in the auxiliary seat of her mecha and what had happened then. Could it be that some issue had cropped up again with the leopard's worrying physical condition?

Concerned, Ling Lan could not help but extend her right hand to hold Li Lanfeng's trembling hands. This move made Li Lanfeng jerk in surprise. He whipped back his head to look at Ling Lan, his red eyes actually filled with despair, pain, and even a trace of insanity. That look was as if he had been abandoned by the entire world...

"Leopard, are you alright?" asked Ling Lan with a serious expression, having sensed something wrong with Li Lanfeng.

Ling Lan's question seemed to have rescued Li Lanfeng from being drowned in his own world — his gaze quickly cleared up. Regaining his composure, Li Lanfeng flipped his hands to grasp Ling Lan's right hand. He clasped it tightly, as if holding on to a life-saving piece of straw, unwilling to let go. The force of his grip actually made Ling Lan feel a hint of pain.

Ling Lan had always hated skin contact with others. She was just considering whether to fling off Li Lanfeng's hands when she registered that Li Lanfeng's palms were coated with sweat. She then thought about Li Lanfeng's wild and desperate gaze previously and her heart softened involuntarily.

Thinking about it, she was currently a boy, so it was perfectly normal for a male companion to hold her hand every once in a while. Furthermore, Li Lanfeng really seemed to need some comfort from a companion right now... alright, she would just take it as her good deed for the day and contribute her right hand to provide some comfort for the other. It's not like her hand would lose any flesh because of this. So thought Ling Lan with full Ah-Q spirit ².

In this way, Ling Lan forced herself to ignore Li Lanfeng's grasping hands. She continued to stare expressionlessly at the stage, studiously researching the problem she had just discovered... erm, well, that was the problem with that Li Yinfei. So unnaturally beautiful, was there really nothing wrong with her?

Perhaps Ling Lan's focus was fully on Li Lanfeng, so she did not notice something else happening at the outermost edge of their row of seats. Li Shiyu, who had initially been fully enraptured by Li Yinfei's voice, currently had an unbelievably horrified expression on his face. This horror was definitely not because of the other's peerless beauty, but looked more as if he had seen a devil...

With a clatter, Li Shiyu could not help but leap up from his seat, startling Chang Xinyuan who had been just as dazzled by Li Yinfei's appearance as the rest. When Chang Xinyuan saw Li Shiyu's horrified expression, he instantly knew something was wrong. Quickly casting Li Yinfei's appearance to the back of his mind, Chang Xinyuan asked Li Shiyu in concern, "Shiyu, what's going on?"

Li Shiyu's right hand rose sharply to cover his mouth, as if afraid that he would scream despite himself. With much effort, he finally calmed himself down, put down his hand, and said in a hurry, "Xinyuan, I've suddenly remembered something important I have to do. I need to leave immediately. Later, please help me request a leave of absence from the leader."

Li Shiyu's grim expression let Chang Xinyuan know that the other must have some serious matter to attend to, so he quickly nodded and assured the other that he would pass on the message. After that, Li Shiyu no longer had any patience to remain at the concert venue. He hurriedly ran out of the large stadium.

As soon as he left the stadium and came outside, the refreshing breeze that swept by instantly helped to clear Li Shiyu's shaken mind. As the attention of everyone in the military academy was on Li Yinfei's concert right then — if they were not at the venue watching it live, they were in their dorm rooms connected to the virtual world to watch the live broadcast — there was not a single person outside the stadium.

With lengthened strides, Li Shiyu very swiftly made his way to an area populated by trees, an absolutely quiet place. He could not wait to enter a string of numbers into his communicator. He had never taken the initiative to contact that number over these past four years, but the number had been stored deeply in his heart all this time, never forgotten.

"Yu-er, I never expected that there would ever come a time when you would contact me on your own volition. Have you thought things through and are now willing to accept grandpa's arrangements to become the first inheritor of the Li family?" On the virtual screen of Li Shiyu's communicator, a dignified old man suddenly appeared. His initially stern face actually carried a trace of a smile — it looked like Li Shiyu's taking the initiative to call had pleased him greatly.

However, Li Shiyu had no mind to appreciate the old man's feelings. Seeing the other, he shouted angrily, "Grandfather, what exactly is going on with that Li Yinfei?"

"Li Yinfei?" The old man's pleased expression abruptly turned cold. "You've seen her?" As if suddenly thinking of something, realization emerged on the old man's face. "That's right, she's currently holding a concert at the First Men's Military Academy. It's normal for you to have seen her."

"Who is she exactly?" Li Shiyu bit out, pushing the question out word by word from the between his teeth.

The old man said dismissively, "A branch descendant of the Li family. According to hierarchy, she can be considered your younger cousin."

"What I'm asking is how that face came about." The old man's diffidence broke Li Shiyu's control over his emotions and Li Shiyu could not help but growl.

This question made the old man's face turn stern and forbidding. "Is this the attitude you should have when speaking with your grandfather?"

Li Shiyu closed his eyes and fiercely swiped a hand over his face. Then, taking in a deep

breath, he pushed down his growing anger before opening his eyes once more. By then, his eyes no longer held any of his previous rage, having become much calmer than before. "I apologize, grandfather, that was my transgression. But please, can you tell me, what's going on with that face of Li Yinfei's?"

Li Shiyu's behaviour gentled the old man's attitude considerably, and he answered lightly, "That face... is anything wrong with it?" as if he did not understand Li Shiyu's meaning.

"Grandfather!" Li Shiyu cried out loudly once more, "You clearly know... clearly..." Somewhere where the old man could not see, Li Shiyu's low hanging left hand had already balled up into a fist. Perhaps from using too much strength, the veins were actually bulging on the back of his hand. It was clear to see how angry Li Shiyu was at this moment, but because the other party was his grandfather, he had no choice but to tolerate it.

"Clearly know what?" asked the old man in return. Just when Li Shiyu's tolerance was about to run out and he was going to explode in anger, the old man added, "Are you trying to ask why Li Yinfei looks exactly like your eldest cousin brother Li Mulan?"

This question made Li Shiyu calm down instantly. "I want to know why you're doing this."

"Why are you asking me this?" The old man's expression turned indifferent once more.

"Without your approval, Li Yinfei could never have appeared in the public eye, much less become a singer. In order to secure the status and dignity of the family head, the Li family would never allow someone with an appearance similar to the family head to show their face to the world." Li Shiyu understood the Li family too well — Li Yinfei looked so much like his eldest cousin brother and so should never exist. Even if she was allowed to exist, she should still have been forced to change her face — this was a sign of respect towards the family head from the main branch as well as the inheritor.

"Li Mulan is currently still not the family head," replied the old man after several seconds of silence.

"But eldest cousin brother is the first in line to inherit," growled Li Shiyu once more. Just because of his body, his cousin could not become strong, and so they felt they could just step all over his cousin's dignity like this? For the first time, Li Shiyu began

to hate the Li family as a whole. Towards that Li Yinfei who possessed his eldest cousin brother's face, the intention to kill stirred in his heart...

"Don't do anything stupid. The matter of Li Yinfei was approved during a meeting of the family elders. Even I had no way of preventing it," barked the old man, seeming to sense the killing intent in Li Shiyu's heart.

"No way?" Li Shiyu laughed scornfully. If grandfather truly wanted to stop this from happening, how could he have no way? Li Shiyu was all too familiar with the methods his grandfather could employ.

Chapter 392

No Longer Li Mulan!

Li Shiyu's extremely obvious mockery caused the old man's expression to stiffen, but he very quickly recovered his composure. The two of them faced each other in silence for several beats, and in the end, the old man sighed, a trace of fatigue appearing on his face. Softly, he said, "Even though I'm a grandfather to the both of you, I am also the family head of the Li family. I need to take responsibility for the entire Li family."

The meaning of the old man was apparent — even though he was the biological grandfather of Li Shiyu and the others, he could not disregard the interests of the Li family as a whole and do as he liked. As such, he had no choice but to make some concessions.

The old man's demeanour caused Li Shiyu's heart to clench. As if sensing his grandfather's helplessness in the face of the pressure exerted by the elders of the Li family, Li Shiyu's expression turned cold and foreboding. "The council of elders, is it?"

"Don't blame them. They are also doing this for the future of the entire Li family clan. The condition of your eldest cousin brother's body is truly too horrible, and besides..." Here, a trace of regret could be seen on the old man's stern face.

Unfortunately, no matter how much the old man wanted to explain, Li Shiyu had already convicted the elders in his heart. He instantly interrupted to say, "Grandfather, there's no need to say any more. I understand everything. One day, I will definitely..." Li Shiyu stopped there, cutting off the call with his grandfather. For the first time, a trace of bloody killing intent appeared in his eyes.

Li Shiyu had never wanted to take anything to the extreme and leave no room for manoeuvring — there had always remained some bit of light in his heart, some kindness and compassion. This was his strength but also his weakness. This was why he had been able to reject the proposition of becoming the first inheritor out of the sense of kinship in his heart for the sake of his eldest cousin brother. And this was also the main reason why Ling Lan had been able to entrap him into joining her clan.

But this time, the matter of Li Yinfei had directly shattered the pure innocence he held

deep in his heart. He finally understood that without power or authority, once one lost all use and value, the family would mercilessly cast one out... for the first time ¹, he hated deeply. He hated those elders who had heartlessly abandoned his eldest cousin brother and made the decision to humiliate and degrade his cousin. Also for the first time, he thought of taking revenge... he absolutely would not forgive those elders.

The old man looked at the disconnected call signal on the device in his hand and could not help but shake his head, sigh softly, and say, "Oh Shiyu, you're still much too young."

After hanging up, Li Shiyu could not hold back the roaring flames of rage within him. He quickly rushed back to his own laboratory and shut himself inside, staying secluded within it for over a month.

Li Shiyu knew very well that this action of the council of elders meant that his eldest cousin brother had thoroughly lost all favour within the Li family. Right now, he must be having a very difficult time in the Li family, unable to do anything. If their grandfather could not resist the pressure from the council of elders in the end, giving up was only a matter of time. He needed to speed things up. Even if he could not develop a formula that could completely resolve his eldest cousin brother's constitution problem, he still needed to at least find some medicinal agent that could alleviate his cousin's condition so that he could help his cousin tide through this crisis as much as he could...

Leaving aside Li Shiyu's burning anxiety, on Li Lanfeng's end, his heart which had initially turned ice-cold with despair had finally recovered due to the warmth coming from Ling Lan's palm. His initially trembling body gradually calmed down as well and his eyes became clear, his entire being appearing unbelievably calm.

Ling Lan had initially wanted to ask if Li Lanfeng wanted to go out to take some fresh air, but she was stopped by the cold, piercing gaze Li Lanfeng was directing at Li Yinfei.

Li Yinfei was still singing — the better Li Yinfei sang, the more worked up the stadium was, and the colder Li Lanfeng's gaze became.

It had to be said that in order to build Li Yinfei's image as a soulful songstress, her management company had indeed invested a lot of money. All five songs she sang this night were classics in their own right though the melodies encompassed various styles, mesmerising all the cadets as they listened. Of course, Li Yinfei's peerless

beauty had to be given a large half of the credit. Due to the advent of gene agents and other reasons, everyone in this era, regardless of gender, was all pretty good-looking. However, it was still rare to find one such peerless beauty like Li Yinfei in the span of a hundred years.

This concert announced Li Yinfei's success. After being broadcast via the virtual world, her singing voice and her appearance made her become the idol of the hundreds and thousands of soldiers of the Huaxia Federation, turning her into one of the most famous soulful singers. Also because her songs were almost all revolving around themes of war and the military, she had a large number of fans among the troops, becoming another national military idol following Ling Xiao.

During the concert, Ling Lan was constantly worried about Li Lanfeng's physical condition, afraid that he would not be able to hold out till the end of the concert. However, as time went on, Li Lanfeng's condition seemed to improve, and by the end, he looked no different than he had at the start. Even so, the perceptive Ling Lan had still sensed that Li Lanfeng now had an additional air of determination about him.

As soon as the concert ended, Li Lanfeng quickly bade goodbye to Ling Lan, as if he had some urgent matter to attend to. The moment Li Lanfeng left, Chang Xinyuan came over to tell Ling Lan about Li Shiyu leaving partway through the concert. This piqued the curiosity of the other team members, and someone voiced the speculation whether Li Yinfei had anything to do with Li Shiyu and Li Lanfeng. After all, they all shared the surname Li, right?

Of course, this question was very quickly flicked aside by everyone. Even if Li Yinfei had some relation to Li Shiyu and Li Lanfeng, so what? Xie Yi and Qi Long may like Li Yinfei's songs, but that was all. They had no thoughts of anything beyond that. Fine, Qi Long and Xie Yi were still young, and having been pressured by Boss Ling Lan all this while, becoming strong had been the only thing on their minds. They still had not reached the point where they started thinking about love.

That said, the outgoing Xie Yi still could not repress his curiosity and sought out Li Yingjie to ask about the matter. However, Li Yingjie's response was pure confusion; he had no clue at all who this Li Yinfei was. Still, Xie Yi's question did stir up some doubt in his mind — Li Yinfei's name was indeed really like someone from their Li family.

Xie Yi was filled with contempt for Li Yingjie's reply. He laughed at Li Yingjie for not even being able to tell for sure whether someone belonged to his family, greatly

infuriating Li Yingjie. Subsequently, Li Yingjie, who never really paid much attention to the chaotic family affairs of the Li family before this, finally made the decision to take any chances he had later on to get a proper list of all the descendants of the Li family branch members so that this bastard Xie Yi would not look down on him again...

Li Yingjie could never have known that this query by Xie Yi would spark his motivation like this and actually set him on the path to discovering a great secret in the future...



As soon as Li Lanfeng returned to his living quarters, he entered his room and closed the door behind him. After ensuring that everything was secure, he dialled his grandfather. On the virtual screen of his communicator, the figure of an old man appeared. It was the same old man who had spoken with Li Shiyu earlier.

When the old man saw Li Lanfeng, the indifference he had sported while speaking with Li Shiyu melted away to be replaced by a slightly bitter smile. He sighed and said, "Shiyu has already contacted me. I was just thinking when you would call me as well. Who knew you had such patience, only calling me after so long..."

Li Lanfeng's expression was frigid as he cut in to say, "Grandpa, Li Yinfei, if I'm not mistaken, should be your doing, right?" Compared to Li Shiyu, Li Lanfeng understood his grandfather better.

The old man's smile disappeared instantly, and his face turned unbelievably stern and serious. "As expected of the inheritor I have invested so much into to cultivate, figuring things out immediately."

"This is because I know too much about your methods, grandpa. I can even deduce that your explanation to Shiyu must be that it was the decision of the council of elders. The poor Li family council of elders, once again becoming your scapegoat." Li Lanfeng's taunting was even more obvious than Li Shiyu's. The expression on the old man's face turned unbelievably awkward; compared with Li Shiyu's gullibility, this grandson of his was as wily as a ghost — nothing could be hidden from him.

Li Lanfeng ignored the embarrassment of the old man and continued to ask, "I just want to know, grandpa, why did you do this?" Li Lanfeng's current tone of voice was so cold that there was almost no warmth at all to be found in it.

"I need to have more than one plan ready." The old man's eyes turned sharp and penetrating. "I will not allow my grandson to fall to the Phoenix Thrall Fate. If things truly come to that point, Li Yinfei will be your replacement."

The old man gave Li Lanfeng a direct answer. For this matter, he had plotted over the course of several years. After much trouble, he finally found Li Yinfei who resembled his grandson as much as 50 to 60% among the Li branch family descendants. The most important thing was that both of Li Yinfei's parents were dead, so he could control everything about her. Over these past few years, he used the latest alteration technology the Li family had at its disposal, and after many experiments, he finally succeeded in making Li Yinfei resemble his grandson up to 90%. Adding on some application of make-up, at one glance, aside from temperament, Li Yinfei was almost indistinguishable from his grandson...

The old man's answer caused Li Lanfeng's heart to seize in pain. At the heart of it, he was still too weak. That was why his grandfather did not believe he could truly defy fate and change his destiny, thus coming up with this humiliating plan for him to escape from his Phoenix Thrall Fate.

"I understand..." Li Lanfeng closed his eyes with a heavy heart, hiding the pain he felt inside. Even his closest relative did not believe in his efforts — how would he be able to prove himself? Moreover, this decision of his grandfather's meant that he would never be able to show his real face in public anymore in the future.

He thought of the rabbit — he had once thought hopefully that, after a few more months, on his 20th birthday, he would be able to stand before the other with full honesty and tell him the whole truth... but now, all of that was no longer possible. He could only continue to live on under the identity of Li Lanfeng, and this may be how it would be for the rest of his life.

The old man seemed to sense Li Lanfeng's grief. He sighed deeply and said, "Sinful things must be given up."

Li Lanfeng laughed tragically. So his grandfather had felt that his looks were a sinful existence? How ridiculous. If the Phoenix Thrall Fate was all because of his face, then wouldn't ruining it be enough? Why bother going through the extra trouble of manufacturing this Li Yinfei? At the heart of it, his grandfather was just trying to fool himself.

Li Lanfeng's laughter finally subsided. His eyes sprang open, sadness flashing briefly in the depths of his gaze as he peered intently at the old man for a moment before saying, "Grandpa, this is the final time I'll be contacting you. From now on, I am no longer Li Mulan but Li Lanfeng... and I can only be Li Lanfeng!"

Hearing this, the old man's body jerked and his eyes swiftly turned red. His mouth twitched soundlessly, but in the end, he merely nodded resolutely and said, "Li Lanfeng, look out for yourself!"

The old man pressed the button to end the call and then stared blankly at the now dark virtual screen. Only after a good long while did he stir to say faintly, "I can only do this much. After this, it's all up to you, Mulan!" Having said that, his entire frame collapsed. His back bent uncontrollably into a curve, and he was no longer as confident and unshakeable as he had appeared to his two grandsons on the screen.

Chapter 393

The Lingtian Mecha Clan!

Time flew, and a year's time was over just like that.

This entire year, the First Men's Military Academy had seemed extremely peaceful and uneventful. That air invasion of the academy a year ago had put a damper on the initially tense and competitive atmosphere of the academy. Those 8000 cadets who had died in the battle had come from multiple factions, which almost encompassed all the factions in the military academy. Certain factions were hit particularly hard and were devastated by the loss of members.

Under this sort of slump, all the factions were in no mood to fight over anything. They all took the time to rest and recuperate, biding their time. The New Cadet Regiment was probably the faction which lost the fewest members in the air invasion incident. With the exception of a minor few who had died in battle with the enemy, Ling Lan's decisive arrangements had allowed most of the members to survive the crisis.

It could not be denied that those New Cadet Regiment members who had survived the battlefield found their mecha control skills improving on a vertical line within this one year. Quite a few intermediate mecha warriors successfully advanced to advanced mecha warrior level, but since they had not officially gone through a mecha practical training session, the academy instructors did not know about it yet. It could be imagined that when the members of the New Cadet Regiment finally entered their mecha practical training courses, they would certainly shock the entire military academy.

Successfully entering the second year meant that the New Cadet Regiment had said goodbye to the chapter of their lives as newbies — they would now officially enter the formal courses of their chosen specialization. This also meant that they now had the right to establish mecha clans that the academy would recognise.

Wu Jiong, Li Yingjie, as well as the other team leaders of the New Cadet Regiment all felt that it was better to establish a mecha clan earlier rather than later. By taking advantage of this time when the old factions had not fully recovered, the New Cadet Regiment would be able to set down secure roots within the military academy.

Ling Lan agreed with them, and so not long after the start of the second year, she submitted the application for the establishment of the Lingtian Mecha Clan to the military academy. This application shocked all of the factions in the academy, and many were even of the opinion that this reckless behaviour of the New Cadet Regiment was bound to be thwarted. This was because the establishment of a mecha clan required the applicant group to pass an assessment by the academy mainframe.

Just think — even if the freshmen had started training their mecha control in Mecha World as early as they could in their first year, one year's time was only enough at most for these freshmen to achieve intermediate mecha warrior status. Moreover, this was only something extremely talented students could achieve. Meanwhile, the virtual battle clans created by the mainframe as the opponent in its assessment would at worst consist of advanced mecha warriors but were more likely to be all special-class operators. Although the result of the assessment was not determined by winning or losing, how many seconds could a team made up of intermediate mecha warriors last under the attack of the mainframe's special-class mecha operator battle clan?

However, the final outcome left everyone flabbergasted — the Lingtian Mecha Clan passed the academy mainframe's assessment in one go. Everyone wanted to know the content of the assessment, but the Lingtian Mecha Clan cruelly set their assessment as a top secret document. Even the academy's principal himself could not access the battle logs of this assessment; only high-level administrators of the military at the rank of general and above would have the authorization to view them... but would the generals even care to pay any attention to a minor mecha clan formation assessment within a military academy?

And so, this assessment became a secret, sealed away for many years. Until that time in the future when Ling Lan had already become a king in her own right — only then did she draw the interest of the high-level people in the Federation military, who then looked up the assessment records. Only then did they come to understand that King Ling had already been crazily overpowered even back during her time at the military academy...

After the Lingtian Mecha Clan was officially established, the various smaller teams within the mecha clan began submitting their applications one after the other in close succession to the academy mainframe to form their own battle clans. The establishment of a battle clan also required a mainframe assessment, and the missions given to the various potential battle clans were not necessarily the same. Ling Lan had originally already established the Lingtian Battle Clan within Mecha World; after she

submitted her application, she actually did not need to take an assessment for the academy mainframe immediately approved it.

This made Ling Lan suspect that Mecha World, which allowed the public to enter and practise their control, was in fact overseen by the military. And that mainframe of Mecha World was very likely the mainframe of the military itself. In reality, the fact that the military academy's mainframe was a split segment of the military mainframe itself was an open secret in the military academy.

Of course, there was one other reason for this speculation of Ling Lan's. The rank of her approved battle clan in the real world was exactly the same as the one in Mecha World, instantly leaping up to 5-star.

This coincidence compelled Ling Lan to be suspicious — how else would this 5-star ranking have come about? Could it be that the military academy's mainframe just happened to suffer a seizure and specially decided to gift her such a grand present? It was impossible just thinking about it.

After the battle clan was established, the original Lingtian Battle Clan members immediately joined again. However, there was one unexpected guest. When Li Lanfeng joined this time, he dragged his good friend Zhao Jun along.

In all honesty, Zhao Jun had not actually wanted to formally join the Lingtian Battle Clan. He had only wanted to sign a one-year temporary contract, but who was Li Lanfeng? His heart set on helping his rabbit increase the strength of his battle clan, Li Lanfeng naturally would not let this super-valuable combat warrior Zhao Jun go.

Thus, under Li Lanfeng's purposeful verbal provocation, Zhao Jun was unable to resist and issued a direct challenge to the clan leader Ling Lan, setting a wager for their fight along with it. If Ling Lan could defeat him, he would join the Lingtian clan and pledge his loyalty as a member of Lingtian without any reservations.

Zhao Jun was a confident person — among the cadets, only about 50 or so had managed to advance to become special-class operators, and Zhao Jun's battle strength had always been in the top three of these 50 or so special-class operators. Additionally, even adding in the one and only cadet who had advanced to become an ace operator, the Thunder King Qiao Ting, Zhao Jun's ranking in terms of battle strength had never dropped out of the top five. This was also why even though he was not someone from Wuji, the Wuji Mecha Clan still had no choice but to lay down their pride and seek him

out for a partnership.

As Zhao Jun was from a third-rate planet, he had very weak backing, and though he himself had no mind to take power and wield authority, he was still an ambitious person who did not want to randomly join some unproven, lame battle clan. He wanted to be a member of some legendary battle clan — therefore, for him to submit, the clan leader needed to have strength on par with the Thunder King Qiao Ting at least. Of course, because of Li Lanfeng, Zhao Jun also hated Qiao Ting with a passion, which was one reason why Zhao Jun had not joined the Leiting Mecha Clan.

With regards to Zhao Jun's challenge, Ling Lan naturally was not afraid. Over this past year, unlike Qi Long and the rest, Ling Lan had not had to attend physical fitness classes during the day; her entire focus had been on training her mecha controls in Mecha World. Her efforts over the year had raised her status in Mecha World from intermediate mecha warrior to ace mecha master, finally reflecting her true strength in the real world.

Thus, as soon as Ling Lan logged into Mecha World and operated an ace mecha onto the arena stage set up for the both of them, Zhao Jun knew that he had lost. Reality proved that Ling Lan's ace operator status was not just for show — her control skills were so powerful that it was scary. Zhao Jun only managed to last 20 moves under Ling Lan before he was KO-ed by a sword right through his cockpit.

This kind of power thoroughly convinced Zhao Jun. After he logged off the virtual world, he shook Li Lanfeng in excitement, asking him how in the world he had found such an aberrant clan leader. Just think — Thunder King Qiao Ting had only broken through to ace operator status in his fourth year, but Ling Lan was currently only a second year, so he had beaten Qiao Ting by two years. Do not underestimate these two years... the younger the age, even the difference of one month was enough to display the difference between the talent and potential of two people. Zhao Jun knew very well that Ling Lan's future was certain to be even better than Qiao Ting's. If Qiao Ting could be said to be the second Ling Xiao, then Ling Lan was very likely to achieve becoming the first Ling Lan.

Li Lanfeng looked at Zhao Jun who was now somewhat hysterical from excitement and found himself rather speechless. Frankly, he had been able to tell with a glance that Ling Lan had already taken it easy and shown some mercy during the fight with Zhao Jun in order to leave him some face. Otherwise, based on Ling Lan's methods, Zhao Jun would never have been able to last more than 10 moves against her. Li Lanfeng had no

idea how he could tell Zhao Jun this — if he stated it bluntly, would Zhao Jun crumble from the shock and fall into a slump?

Besides, his rabbit had already become an ace operator in the first year. If he told Zhao Jun this, would his good friend be stunned silly from the overwhelming shock?

After musing about it for a long while, Li Lanfeng decided that in order to preserve the sanity of his good friend and save him from losing himself due to shock, he would mercifully keep the truth concealed for now. Li Lanfeng felt that he was truly such a kind person...

In this manner, Zhao Jun was whole-heartedly convinced into joining the Lingtian Battle Clan, and so within the early days of its establishment, the Lingtian Battle Clan already had 10 members. Of course, there were still many waitlisted members yet to be added to the ranks. When the first year ended, Han Jijun and Luo Lang went back home once, and they returned with several strong requests from various people.

It turned out that Luo Chao, Han Xuya, and the original members of team 072 all sent word that they would officially join the Lingtian Battle Clan once they entered an army division. In particular, Han Xuya threatened Ling Lan with extreme violence that he was not allowed to say no!

Of course, Ling Lan's plans to go to the 23rd Division had been conveyed by Luo Lang and the others to the members of team 072. Aside from a few with excellent grades who decided to apply for enlistment to the 23rd Division along with Ling Lan and the rest at the First Academy in their fifth year, the others could only wait till they properly graduated before applying.

Ling Lan naturally would not refuse these scattered companions of hers who wanted to reunite with them. Rather than taking in some unfamiliar outsiders, Ling Lan was more willing to trust these companions who had grown up together with her. Right then, Ling Lan was also secretly rejoicing that they had managed to complete that SSS-rank mission back then, promoting the clan's level up to 5-star right away so they could take in so many more people. Otherwise, she would have had to start worrying over these next few years how she could raise the level of her battle clan as soon as possible to accommodate these companions.

Having settled the matter of these outside companions, Ling Lan began to fret over the current internal members. Ling Lan had no need to concern herself over Qi Long and

the other four of her original team — many years of cultivation and training had already ensured that their combat power and rapport with one another were outstanding.

However, the newly joined Chang Xinyuan was a huge problem. Even though he was extremely hardworking and tenacious, his mecha control talent was truly not that great. Over this past year, although Qi Long and the rest were still advanced mecha warriors, they had already touched the doorway to becoming special-class operators. They were now just waiting for a lucky chance, like when Li Lanfeng had encountered during the air invasion, to break through into the ranks of the special-class operators.

For an intermediate mecha warrior to advance to become an advanced mecha warrior, there was no need for any special insight. As long as they obtained enough experience and trained their control hand speed up to a certain standard, they would successfully advance. Basically, there wasn't any particular threshold in advancing from intermediate mecha to advanced mecha.

Chapter 394

Leiting's Letter of Challenge!

But such a simple thing became extremely difficult when it came to Chang Xinyuan. His hand speed was stuck at the highest intermediate value — just a one-second improvement would be enough to judge him ready to advance. However, it was precisely this one second that left Chang Xinyuan helpless and floundering.

When Ling Lan found out that Chang Xinyuan was unable to break through to gain that one second on his hand speed no matter how hard he practised, she knew that Chang Xinyuan had encountered a bottleneck in his talent. This was not something that training could overcome — he needed a chance for a breakthrough, and Ling Lan herself did not know where this chance would come from. When Chang Xinyuan learned of this situation, he was greatly impacted, and fell into a depressed mood for a time. Luckily, the other members of the clan often sought him out to ask him to do things, using the business of modification to help Chang Xinyuan forget this mental blow. Only this helped save the team's prodigy mechanic.

Chang Xinyuan's problem was only waiting on an opportunity, and even though the chances of this opportunity occurring seemed infinitesimal, it was at least still possible.

In the clan, Li Shiyu's mecha control talent was clearly pretty good, but his whole focus was on the research of medicine. If Ling Lan had not given a strict command that all members of the clan had to train their mecha control for no less than two hours every day, Li Shiyu most probably would not even go practise his mecha control.

Although Ling Lan felt it was a bit of a pity that Li Shiyu was wasting his mecha control talent like this, she understood that everyone had their own goals and pursuits, so it was not her place to interfere with Li Shiyu's personal choice. Fortunately, due to the mandatory two hours of practice every day, Li Shiyu's mecha control did not lag behind the others by too much. Even though he was still an advanced mecha warrior, he had still risen from the primary stage to the middle stage. As long as Li Shiyu did not give up and stop practising, he should enter the late stage of advanced mecha warrior level in a few months, so Ling Lan was quite reassured by this.

Having been through an air invasion, Ling Lan knew very well that on the battlefield, all those below special-class operator level were just cannon fodder. To ensure the survival of as many team members as possible, she needed to make them all advance to special-class operator level before graduation to be safe.

Zhao Jun's mecha control ability was the strongest in the clan aside from Ling Lan. Moreover, like Qi Long, he was an obsessed fanatic of mecha control, and having participated very often in mecha battles while he was with the Wuji Mecha Clan, his battle experience was also a bracket higher than Qi Long and the rest. Thus, Ling Lan felt he was very reliable — she believed that even if the other members in the clan made a mistake and dropped the ball ¹ during a critical moment, Zhao Jun would never do so.

Sometimes, trust did not need a long time to develop. Zhao Jun's personality made Ling Lan accept him very quickly — it could not be denied that the fact that Zhao Jun was Li Lanfeng's friend was a major factor. In short, Zhao Jun had been deemed a trustworthy person by Ling Lan, but of course, to truly be integrated into the Lingtian Battle Clan, Zhao Jun would still need to work hard.

What Ling Lan was really worried about was still the leopard Li Lanfeng. Li Lanfeng's physical constitution issue was actually hidden very deeply — other than Ling Lan, none of the other members in the clan knew about it. Even his good friend Zhao Jun only had some inkling of it and not a very clear one at that.

Since Ling Lan had already decided to establish a battle clan, she naturally would not permit any weakness to appear in her battle clan. She found an opportunity to meet up with Li Lanfeng to discuss the issue once. Perhaps Li Lanfeng had a sort of irrational blind trust in Ling Lan, for when Ling Lan asked him about his physical condition, Li Lanfeng did not hide anything, directly revealing the true situation to her.

The truth was as Ling Lan had imagined. It was indeed because his spiritual power was too strong for his body to handle that Li Lanfeng had this sequela ², just like Ling Lan in her previous life. The lucky thing was that this world had gene agents as well as all types of physical skills to improve one's physique, ensuring that Li Lanfeng did not have to die young as Ling Lan had in her past life. Still, even so, his body had never truly been well, forever hovering in a state of extreme weakness.

Reasonably speaking, Li Lanfeng's body did not permit him to walk the path of a mecha operator — when Ling Lan had asked Li Lanfeng why he had chosen this

apparently suicidal path, Li Lanfeng had been silent for a good long while, as if having something difficult to divulge. In the end, he had only said bitterly that he wanted to become someone strong who could truly control his own destiny.

When Li Lanfeng had said these words, his eyes clearly held a trace of uncertainty, but there was even more determination in them. Perhaps, he had decided to walk this path with no guarantees only because he did not want to succumb to fate... even if he had to pay with his life, he wanted to fight just once at least.

Seeing this kind of Li Lanfeng, Ling Lan could not help but think of her own situation. Although she had been forced from the beginning to disguise herself as a man, all her subsequent actions, all of her efforts, were they not all for the sake of controlling her own destiny?

Ling Lan empathized. She thought about Li Lanfeng's identity — he was even worse off than her as he was only a branch family descendant of the Li family. Although she was unclear what kind of family clan the Li family was, having read all types of novels in her previous world, Ling Lan could imagine what it was like. For a branch family descendant to obtain true speaking rights and be a free person, they needed to gain strength beyond the family clan's control. Otherwise, they would only become tools of the family clan and may even become a sacrificial victim for the family when necessary.

Having reached an understanding in her heart, Ling Lan decided not to ask Li Lanfeng anything more. After all, that was Li Lanfeng's private affairs — Ling Lan did not want to pry at the other's wounds. However, Ling Lan was filled with admiration for Li Lanfeng's stubborn determination and courage to become strong enough to decide his own fate even if he died. Sure enough, someone she acknowledged would never be a coward!

Since Li Lanfeng had the courage, Ling Lan herself would spare no effort to help her good friend. She meticulously developed a set of fitness training programs for Li Lanfeng, and she also unstintingly taught her Qi exercises to Li Lanfeng. However, it was not as effective as Ling Lan had imagined. Compared to when Ling Lan had started practising it in her mother's womb, there did not seem to be much effect when the already 20 years old Li Lanfeng practised it.

Still, Li Lanfeng was extremely lucky. With the modified gene agent Li Shiyu provided, Little Four improved it to raise the purity of the agent to 100%, allowing Li Lanfeng's frail body to fully absorb it. Li Lanfeng's body gradually began to improve, and his

tenacity in practising the Qi exercises slowly began to show effect. The gradual improvement of his body left Li Lanfeng overjoyed. There was finally hope that this illness plaguing him for these 20 years would be cured.

After a year of effort, though Li Lanfeng's physical constitution still could not compare to the tough and sturdy build of an average mecha operator, he was at least no longer that sickly weakling he was before who could only handle intense mecha operation for 10 minutes. The duration Li Lanfeng could sustain in high-intensity mecha combat increased from the initial 10 minutes to 20, and if he was in a better state, that time would be extended. And this new time was already enough to sustain him through a small-scale mecha fight.

This also meant that from now on, Li Lanfeng would no longer be the battle clan's weak point in the many mecha fights to come. Ling Lan was very satisfied with this result.

Although the Lingtian Battle Clan had miscellaneous problems here and there, overall, the battle clan was still developing in a healthy direction. Meanwhile, the Lingtian Mecha Clan was also gradually stepping onto the right track under the combined efforts of the various team leaders under its banner. Right at this juncture, a letter of challenge suddenly descended upon the Lingtian Mecha Clan, breaking the peaceful status quo of the entire military academy.



In Ling Lan's villa, all the regiment commanders and team leaders of the Lingtian Mecha Clan were gathered. They were all here for the same thing — to decide how they would deal with the letter of challenge from the Leiting Mecha Clan.

Yes, this letter of challenge was from the strongest faction in the academy — the Leiting Mecha Clan!

The letter of challenge being passed around was made of paper. Of course, the true letter of challenge had already been submitted digitally to the academy mainframe by the Leiting Mecha Clan. As the regiment commander of the Lingtian Mecha Clan, Ling Lan had received a notification from the mainframe at the earliest notice. However, the Thunder King had been extremely provocative. He had specially produced a physical paper letter of challenge and had personally sent someone to deliver it to the second year dormitories and hand it over to the public regiment commander Wu Jiong.

Wu Jiong was well aware that the purpose of this action was so that the other party could announce to the entire academy that Leiting had chosen to enact their revenge now for their defeat in that arena battle a year ago.

Wu Jiong understood what the other's intention was, but he still had no choice but to bite the bullet. The Lingtian Mecha Clan had just been established — if they avoided the challenge now, the Lingtian Mecha Clan would inevitably become the laughing stock of the entire school, let alone being able to rise and develop any further after this.

After all the team leaders had taken a look at the letter of challenge, the letter once again returned to Wu Jiong's hands.

When Wu Jiong saw that large signature at the end of the letter of challenge once again, he could not hold back the rage in his heart any longer. He hissed angrily, "I had thought that the four major factions had suffered heavy losses during that air invasion incident last year and needed to rest and regroup, and so would not have any time to spare on us. Which is why I had wanted to take advantage of this lull to quickly establish our mecha clan early and use this time to grow our faction. Who knew that this Qiao Ting would see through our plan and issue this letter of challenge while we still have not secured our standing... he is obviously planning to crush us with one strike and completely scatter our mecha clan. How despicable!" That said, unable to rein in his anger, his right hand slammed down on the armrest of his chair, the force of which instantly caused numerous cracks to appear in the armrest.

Standing not too far behind Ling Lan, Lin Zhong-qing's face could not help but twitch, heart aching as he calculated in his mind — *Hells, 3000 credits gone just like that...*

Wu Jiong's words also ignited Li Yingjie's rage. He was a haughty person to begin with and was not as reserved as Wu Jiong; he instantly raged openly, "That bastard Qiao Ting! Knowing that we do not have an ace operator, he actually has the face to challenge us personally. For the sake of victory, he really doesn't care about losing face anymore ³."

Seated across from Li Yingjie, when Qi Long heard Li Yingjie's yelling, a smile appeared on his face. It seemed as if he fully approved of Li Yingjie's words, but only he knew that he was smiling because Qiao Ting was about to be a victim of his own cleverness. Thinking victory was at hand, yet not knowing that the opponent he was about to face, Qi Long's boss, was already an ace operator as well. If it could be said that the other

had some chance of winning a year ago, now, Qi Long really did not think Qiao Ting had any chances of winning left.

Li Yingjie's words resonated with everyone present. The other team leaders also began to grumble and roar, scolding Qiao Ting for his shamelessness.

Only Gao Jinyun sitting in the periphery of the circle did not join in, instead sitting quietly as he contemplated something with a solemn expression... right at that moment, Ling Lan's initially closed eyes sprang open to sweep a cool gaze around the circle. Her pressing gaze instantly stopped all the angry mutters and bellowing in the room.

Cold sweat beaded the foreheads of everyone present — Boss Lan's force of presence was becoming stronger by the day. Now, just one glance was enough to make them sense danger, and on top of that, it was as if the surrounding temperature had become frozen.

Chapter 395

Gao Jinyun's Suggestion!

"Gao Jinyun, what do you think?" Into the cold silence, Ling Lan finally opened her mouth, but unexpectedly called out Gao Jinyun.

This caused Wu Jiong sitting by her side to raise his brows in surprise. Li Yingjie was at first rather puzzled, but he quickly turned to stare curiously at Gao Jinyun, wanting to know what about this person had gained Boss Lan's approbation.

Ling Lan's direct callout stunned Gao Jinyun, but he was instantly taken by wild joy. In contrast to the other team leaders who did not know Boss Lan's full strength, having been saved by Ling Lan once before, he naturally knew how powerful Boss Lan was now. Everyone felt that the Lingtian Mecha Clan was sure to lose, but he did not agree. Leiting, who did not understand Boss Lan's full strength, was sure to once again lose to the Lingtian Mecha Clan...

And now, for Ling Lan to personally ask his opinion, did this mean he had successfully entered Boss Lan's esteem? The very thought energized Gao Jinyun, but still, he knew deep down that if he could not say anything constructive or insightful now, he was likely to waste this opportunity.

Therefore, Gao Jinyun forcefully repressed the excitement churning within him and considered the situation carefully for a moment before saying measuredly, "Regiment Commander Ling, since you've asked for my opinion, then let me say a little about this. If I say anything wrong, I beg the pardon of the regiment commanders and team leaders here."

Gao Jinyun's demeanour was very humble, greatly improving his impression in the eyes of the team leaders present, eliminating the possible friction which might have arisen from envy. Wu Jiong's eyes flashed at his words — he had not expected that there would be such a capable team leader in the mecha clan who was not from their academy; he had neglected this possibility.

After Gao Jinyun finished setting the scene, he finally explained his view. "Indeed, the Leiting Mecha Clan is very strong, and moreover, their regiment commander, Thunder

King Qiao Ting, is the only publicly known ace operator in the military academy among the cadets..." At this point, Gao Jinyun glanced reflexively at Boss Lan, but he very quickly reeled his gaze back and continued to say, "But I don't think our Lingtian Mecha Clan has no chance of winning at all."

Ling Lan's lips quirked. This Gao Jinyun was an interesting character, because he did not announce to the others that she was an ace operator. Instead, he used his words so adeptly — anyone who knew what's what would understand the hidden meaning behind Gao Jinyun's words.

Sure enough, when Ling Lan's team members heard what Gao Jinyun said, they smiled lightly in unplanned unison; it looked like they had all caught the connotation of Gao Jinyun's words.

Even though the others could not grasp the true meaning of Gao Jinyun's words, their spirits rallied when they heard that their mecha clan was not completely sure to lose. Li Yingjie was particularly impatient, instantly speaking up to ask, "What do you mean?"

"Over this period of time, I have seriously studied the mecha battles between mecha clans. Although there are no restrictions whatsoever with regards to the team leader, there are limitations on the number of team members and their levels. Especially for challenge battles where senior cadets are up against cadets junior to them, the restrictions are even greater."

Gao Jinyun's reminder sparked Wu Jiong's memory and he instantly understood what the other was getting at. He nodded emphatically and said, "Gao Jinyun is right. I actually forgot that challenge fights had these regulations." Wu Jiong rapped his own head in frustration, smiling wryly as he said, "In order to eliminate vicious predatory competition among the mecha clans, especially when it comes to seniors against juniors, the mainframe has set up some protective rules in favour of the disadvantaged party. As soon as it discovers that the skill level between the two parties involved in a challenge diverges by too much, making the match-up extremely unequal, the mainframe will instantly determine that this is malicious predatory competition and declare the challenge invalid. Of course, this mainframe protective measure for the lower grade cadets can only be applied three times ¹. However, every time a challenge is denied, a new challenge can only be issued three months later. If the strength of the battle clan the Leiting Mecha Clan sends out against us exceeds our level by too much, the mainframe's protective regulations will be triggered. With that, we'll still have

about a year's time to grow. This is a route we can properly utilise..."

As the team leaders seated here had never encountered a battle between mecha clans before, they did not know all these things. They all quickly spoke up to urge Regiment Commander Wu Jiong to explain how they could get the mainframe to determine this challenge as malicious competition.

Wu Jiong then laid out the rules in detail. It turned out that when upper year cadets challenged lower year cadets, other than the team leader's level being unrestricted, the overall strength of the other members participating in the fight could not exceed the challenged lower grade clan's overall strength by too much. If not, the challenge would be deemed as unfair and be voided. Of course, how much the overall strength needed to exceed to be considered malicious competition was not something Wu Jiong, who had never been in a mecha challenge fight himself, knew for certain either, because it was not stated clearly in the rules. In the end, it would all still depend on the final submitted name lists from both sides.

While everyone was discussing how best to utilise the mainframe's protective rules, Gao Jinyun coughed sharply to draw everyone's attention before saying loudly, "I want to add that there are three tiers for mecha fights. A 12-man fight, a 24-man fight, and a 50-man group battle. Boss Lan, it seems like the tier of the battle is up to the challenger to decide, right?"

Ling Lan nodded in response to Gao Jinyun's question, indicating that he had it right.

Gao Jinyun's brow furrowed as he sighed and said, "This way, we're rather disadvantaged. The initiative is in the hands of the opponent. If we could have chosen the tier, our chances of winning would be higher."

"Oh? Setting aside how the opponent will choose, tell me your thoughts." Ling Lan raised a brow. She had always thought that Li Lanfeng and Han Jijyun from her own team were already very rare military strategist combat types — unexpectedly, this team leader who was not from the Central Scout Academy seemed to be no weaker than the two of them in terms of strategizing. This piqued Ling Lan's interest; she now wanted to see how far Gao Jinyun could go.

Ling Lan was not only focused on cultivating her own battle clan, she was also cultivating some allied teams at the same time. Whether in military administration or on the battlefield, having the support of some dependable allies would invariably

make her path smoother and more stable. Thus, she viewed Wu Jiong's team with high regard and also employed both carrot and stick with Li Yingjie. Since they were all from the Central Scout Academy, Ling Lan did not wish for Li Yingjie to slow everyone down.

However, if Gao Jinyun also showed promise, Ling Lan would not hesitate to cultivate him as well and be generous with her trust. In contrast to Wu Jiong and the others who may have some nepotism mentality, Ling Lan did not distinguish between main or side branches when it came to people. As long as someone had the skills and had a passable personality, Ling Lan definitely would not discriminate against them due to their birth or background.

The moment Ling Lan said this, everyone was gobsmacked, and Gao Jinyun himself was staring with both shock and joy at Ling Lan. Although Ling Lan's gaze was as placid as ever, the encouragement within her eyes was clear. This moved Gao Jinyun considerably, and his body actually began to tremble uncontrollably.

Several of the other team leaders were even staring at Gao Jinyun with envious eyes. These words from Boss Lan pretty much confirmed that Gao Jinyun had truly entered Boss Lan's scope of attention. As long as Gao Jinyun did not do anything wrong after this, his team would definitely receive focused cultivation from Boss Lan. It could be predicted that Gao Jinyun's team would become one of the strongest teams aside from those battle clans of the regiment commanders in the faction.

Gao Jinyun clenched his fists tightly, telling himself to calm down. The more exciting the situation was, the more he could not afford to make any mistakes. He took a deep breath and let his emotions settle a little before saying, "Regiment Commander, this is what I think. If we get to choose, we must choose the 12-man challenge fight. Even though our overall strength cannot compare to Leiting's, when it comes to elite fighters, we're actually not much weaker than Leiting."

Initially, they had thought that Gao Jinyun would say something mind-blowing, but he had unexpectedly said this. Even if everyone had confidence in themselves, they still felt that there was quite a bit of a gap between their strength and that of the elite battle clans of the Leiting Mecha Clan. One of the team leaders even retorted, "Team leader Gao, as far as I know, Leiting has 15 special-class operators at the very least. Even though we have the confidence to say that we can achieve that same level two to three years later, right now, we're still mostly advanced mecha warriors. There's no way we can compare to Leiting's special-class operators in terms of strength."

Questioned, Gao Jinyun's expression held no trace of panic. Instead, with a face full of determination, he said, "I know, but I also know that the opponent cannot send all of their special-class operators onto the field, or else this challenge fight will not be approved by the mainframe."

Ling Lan's lips curved up slightly once more at these words. As she expected, Gao Jinyun had also noticed this point — he was a seed deserving of cultivation.

Gao Jinyun's resolute words made the eyes of everyone present light up. That's right, if the opponent sent out all their special-class operators, adding on the leading ace operator, this challenge fight would just be completely thrown out. To protect the freshmen, the mainframe would definitely reject this challenge fight. Everyone now understood what Gao Jinyun was saying when he mentioned the elite fighters. If the opponent lowered their requirements and chose advanced mecha warriors to represent them, Lingtian would still be able to put up a fight.

"The most important thing now is how we can hide our strength from the opponent. If Leiting finds out how strong we are and arranges their troops in formations specifically suited to counter us..." At this point, Gao Jinyun's face turned grim. "The situation will not be optimistic for us. Only if Leiting is uncertain to the depths of our true strength will we have a chance to win."

Gao Jinyun's words made a calm settle down on the entire venue. Some team leaders seemed to have thought of something, a trace of frustration appearing on their faces. It looked like their strength levels must have been scouted out by Leiting quite recently.

Li Yingjie's expression was also extremely unsightly. He recalled a scene in Mecha World where he had been provoked by some people. Back then, he had not been able to hold back his temper and had fought with the opponent several times in the arena. Although he had defeated the opponent multiple times and had obtained quite a lot of victory spoils, thinking back on the incident now, it was truly too fishy. It looked like he must have fallen for Leiting's trap.

Ling Lan swept a swift gaze around the hall, taking stock of everyone's countenance, thus gaining a rough idea of which people had been scouted out. Then, she said, "Looks like, some of you already sense that something is wrong. Still, even if Leiting has discovered your true strength, the impact on this mecha battle will not be too significant, so you all don't have to be too upset."

Even though Ling Lan's tone was cold, her words proved that she was not angry. This let those self-recriminating team leaders, including Li Yingjie, put aside some of their worries. Having been sounded out by the enemy, they were indeed very angry, but they were even more afraid of Boss Lan's anger.

Chapter 396

Stepping Stone and That Chicken!

"Gao Jinyun's proposal is very accurate. The 12-man mecha fight is indeed the most advantageous for us. In comparison, the 50-man clan fight is the most disadvantageous because although we have already established our mecha clan, we have never experienced a large-scale mecha fight. I believe that in Mecha World, the most you all would have encountered would have been a 24-man cooperative battle, and many of you would probably only have experienced a 6-12 person mini battle clan mission, right?"

Ling Lan's question received nods from all corners of the room. Indeed, these team leaders' strength was not sufficient for them to participate in large-scale team missions. In this regard, they truly had no experience.

"If Qiao Ting simply needs a victory to wipe away the disgrace Leiting suffered when they lost to us, he should choose the safer option of the 50-man large-scale clan fight. However, as far as I know, Qiao Ting is a very aloof and confident person, perhaps even somewhat arbitrary and wilful. Using this sort of safe method to defeat us, for him, may be a disgrace in and of itself."

At this point, Ling Lan paused, then continued to say, "The reason he has decided to challenge us now is — one, he is indeed afraid we'll use this time to fully develop our clan, and two, their fifth-year division assessment is about to start. Qiao Ting is probably thinking of using this challenge fight before the assessment to carve his name gloriously upon the military academy's historical list of honour... in order to achieve this objective, Qiao Ting is unlikely to choose even the 24-man battle; he will only choose the 12-man battle which can best showcase individual ability."

After saying all this, Ling Lan did not seem to feel any pressure at all. She nonchalantly tugged at the cuff of her right sleeve, her expression unperturbed as she continued to say, "As for special-class operators, he will not send them. The members who will fight alongside him should all be advanced mecha warriors. This challenge fight is his personal exhibition, and those members are just there as a backdrop to his strength."

Stating this, the corners of Ling Lan's lips curled slightly into a mocking smirk. An

enemy who thought highly of himself was in fact the easiest to handle — she had always thought that Qiao Ting might be her greatest enemy and obstacle to dominating the military academy, but now, from the looks of it, he might be the easiest one to handle. Hopefully, after this battle, Qiao Ting would not give up on himself from the shock! It was not easy for Ling Lan to find a rival on par with her — she still wanted to play some more.

"Ah, is he looking down on our Lingtian Mecha Clan?!" Ling Lan's words stirred up everyone present; their faces were flushed with indignant rage, and quite a few actually broke out swearing. If things really turned out as Ling Lan had said, Qiao Ting's decision absolutely meant that they were nothing in Qiao Ting's eyes.

Observing the frothing indignation of the people before her, Ling Lan's eyes closed once more and she showed no intent of saying anything more. Xie Yi, standing to one side, knew that his boss was not interested in explaining things any further, so he quickly stepped in to add on behalf of his boss, "Everyone, have you all paid attention to that bit of gossip recently?"

Xie Yi was unsure why, over the course of this past year, his boss had become more and more reticent. Boss would only communicate with them with his gaze and his actions, but the effect was quite good — the team members could almost always understand what their boss was trying to convey. However, even as team rapport improved, the pressure the team members felt increased accordingly. They just could not tell when they would fall out of favour with the boss... oh, how uneasy it made them feel.

Xie Yi's words gathered the entire group's attention once more. Right now, Xie Yi was no longer simply a member of Ling Lan's team but also its external relations officer. What Xie Yi said was very often the intent of Ling Lan's battle clan as a whole, so they could not take him lightly.

Just as everyone was confused, uncertain which bit of gossip Xie Yi was referring to, Xie Yi elaborated, "I hear that Qiao Ting has been trying hard to chase the soul singer Li Yinfei recently, but Li Yinfei has made a high-profile announcement that her future partner shall be an indomitable king. Only if one can fulfil that criteria would that person be qualified to pursue her. In order to become a king in Li Yinfei's eyes and be qualified enough to pursue her, Qiao Ting must use exceptional results as proof. He wants to become the king of the academy, and the one stain on his kingly image is precisely our newly established Lingtian Mecha Clan. In order to prove publicly that

he is truly the king of the academy, he can only use an overwhelming victory to clear away the shame from his faction's previous defeat. As such, he can only challenge us in the way Boss Lan has explained. Ah, how beauty leads one astray..." said Xie Yi gleefully with a dramatic sigh, causing many of the seated members to chuckle despite themselves.

Right then, at the bend of the staircase leading up to the second floor, a dark figure was standing within the shadowed recesses of the corner. When he heard what Xie Yi said, his body actually shuddered, but he very quickly stood straight and steady again, as if that brief lapse was all just an illusion.

"Just obsessed with that face? It looks like my speculations are correct. Qiao Ting really is that despicable king..." A trace of disgust flashed across the black figure's eyes, killing intent right on its tail, but the disgust and killing intent soon dissipated to be replaced by sheer bitterness. What means could he, who was still a special-class operator, have to deal with the other? He was still too weak.

Very soon, the black figure recovered from the mental shock and his gaze became determined once more. He believed that as long as he followed the rabbit's arrangements and continued working hard, he would become strong one day, strong enough to match Qiao Ting's strength. At that time, he would personally end this evil fated bond.

Xie Yi waited for everyone's laughter to subside before continuing to say, "Of course, Qiao Ting has a wonderful plan. Personally put an end to the grudge between us, take the prized throne of the king of the academy and, with this air of majestic authority, sweep right into some army division to gain loads of accolades. And then, riding this momentum, he will rise higher and higher to finally become the veritable king of Mecha World and win the heart of the great beauty Li Yinfei. It cannot be denied that Qiao Ting has an ideal plan in place, and he views our Lingtian Mecha Clan as a solid stepping stone... However, our Lingtian Mecha Clan is no sandbag which he can push around as he likes ^{1...}" At this point, Xie Yi's smile disappeared completely and a trace of iciness could be seen on his face; it actually resembled the cold air of Boss Lan somewhat.

So after following Boss Lan for so long, one would also inherit this special ability of Boss Lan's. Even the ever-smiling Xie Yi could make others feel so cold the moment his expression turned stony... the group snuck a glance at the frozen face of the person sitting in the main chair, the expressionless Ling Lan, and once again confirmed that

Boss Lan was truly unmatched in dominance. Her influential power was just too great.

These words of Xie Yi's finally let everyone understand why Boss Lan would conclude that Qiao Ting would choose the 12-man battle mode when challenging them. Everyone could not help but be filled with admiration. Wu Jiong was the one who felt this most profoundly. His gaze was filled with admiration and respect when he looked at Ling Lan, but it also carried a trace of frustrated disappointment.

The more he spent time with Ling Lan, the more he felt that Ling Lan was unfathomable. After establishing the Lingtian Mecha Clan, Wu Jiong knew very well that though Ling Lan was the first chair in their mecha clan, she actually did not handle anything — the true manager of the Lingtian Mecha Clan was him, Wu Jiong. But when the Leiting Mecha Clan had issued their letter of challenge, filling him with panic, Ling Lan had calmly collected data and intel on Leiting and Qiao Ting. He had completely overlooked some of these news and gossip which had seemed disjointed and unrelated, but Ling Lan had been able to find some clues from all of it, swiftly grasping the key points to determine the possible behaviour of the opponent. Obviously, in terms of gauging the big picture, he was still no match for Ling Lan.

At this thought, Wu Jiong could not help but glance at Gao Jinyun, who had by now resumed his usual humble manner. This person had always been extremely low-key and unobtrusive, so low-key that they had all overlooked him. Yet, despite not actively managing the clan, Boss Lan had been able to see his strengths with just one glance, only choosing him among all the others to speak. This astute vision was equally worthy of Wu Jiong's admiration and envy — in terms of mining talent, he was also no match for Boss Ling Lan.

Wu Jiong could see very clearly that the interaction between Ling Lan and Gao Jinyun had not been a pre-planned thing. The pleasant surprise and excitement on Gao Jinyun's face could not have been faked. Unless Gao Jinyun was a natural actor whose acting skills had already achieved flawless perfection, there was no way his reaction could be that real.

His father had spoken truly — following an exceptional person would indeed let him learn many things he never knew before, and come to recognise weaknesses he had not noticed in himself previously... but, father, when someone was so strong that one could only look up at them, how could he find the courage to oppose the other? Wu Jiong could not help but smile wryly...

The Lingtian Mecha Clan came to a consensus; they could only wait to see what Qiao Ting would do now. As expected, Qiao Ting did not give the Lingtian Mecha Clan too much time to prepare. The very next day, the Lingtian Mecha Clan had already received a notification from the academy mainframe. It was truly as Ling Lan had predicted. The Leiting Mecha Clan had chosen the 12-man mecha challenge fight, and the leader of the representative team was Qiao Ting.

At the bottom of the notification from the mainframe was a reminder for the Lingtian Mecha Clan and the Leiting Mecha Clan to make sure and submit the official name list of their participating members to the mainframe three days later.

In reality, when Ling Lan had judged that Qiao Ting would choose the 12-man challenge fight, she had already had a name list in mind. However, she had not announced the list because, for one, she wanted to wait and see if she had missed anything. And secondly, she also did not want Leiting to somehow find out about this list and make some adjustment specifically countering it.

Since Qiao Ting was planning to use the Lingtian Mecha Clan as his stepping stone to crowning himself king, then he should not blame her for planning to use the Leiting Mecha Clan as her mecha clan's 'chicken' in a lesson to strike fear into the 'monkeys' of the military academy ².



In the headquarters of the Leiting Mecha Clan, Qiao Ting seemed to be waiting for something. Finally, someone rushed in from outside. Seeing this person appear, Qiao Ting's initially tense expression eased slightly.

"Did you manage to get the participating name list of the Lingtian Mecha Clan?" asked one of the people standing beside Qiao Ting hurriedly. As a confidant of Qiao Ting's, he knew very well what Qiao Ting wanted to know most right now.

"No, the name list is being held by their regiment commander. Even the team leaders below are not sure who will be fighting in the end. But what we can confirm is that all of the regiment commanders will be participating, and the remaining few slots should be selected from among the various team leaders." The newcomer wiped the cold sweat from his forehead. He had not been able to obtain the true name list even after using about three days' time. This made him feel rather timid, worried whether his regiment commander would blame him for this.

Chapter 397

Choosing A Mentor!

Qiao Ting could not help but frown at these words. It looked like the Lingtian Mecha Clan was on guard against spies after their name list.

However, Qiao Ting's brow soon smoothed out again. For the Lingtian Mecha Clan to place so much importance on their name list, so afraid that it would be leaked... that was a sign of low confidence; this was a good thing. Moreover, even if he did not know the contents of the opponent's name list, as long as he was here, even if all the members he brought with him were intermediate mecha warriors, victory would still belong to the Leiting Mecha Clan. It looked like this match just meant way too much to him, causing him to be somewhat unsettled.

Seeing that the regiment commander was not angry, the newcomer instantly relaxed. He quickly took out a chip and hand handed it over, saying, "This is the intel we've managed to gather on the various regiment commanders and team leaders of the Lingtian Mecha Clan over the past few days. The ones marked with red dots are those we reckon could be on the representative name list."

Someone beside Qiao Ting quickly reached out to take the chip and then handed it respectfully to Qiao Ting. Qiao Ting accepted the chip and aligned it with his communicator to scan it, thus copying over all the contents of the data chip.

Soon, from Qiao Ting's communicator, a virtual screen sprang out before Qiao Ting's face, and the information contained in the chip was fully displayed on the screen.

The first name on the list was Ling Lan. However, all aspects after Ling Lan's name were filled with question marks ¹ — in the end, as the final conclusion, there was only one hypothesis, speculating that the other might be an advanced mecha warrior, or maybe even a special-class operator.

"This is the intel you all have gathered?" Looking at the page full of question marks, and that unverified speculation, Qiao Ting's face turned dark as he snapped out the question.

The newcomer wiped away the cold sweat on his forehead and hurried to explain, "Regiment Commander, it's like this. The first regiment commander of the Lingtian Mecha Clan has always acted on his own. Our people have no way of obtaining any accurate information on him from others. However, we still managed to get some detailed info on the other regiment commanders and team leaders. Our hypothesis is also based on the other regiment commanders and team leaders, so there is a certain factual basis for it."

Qiao Ting sniffed coldly before looking down at the intel again. Sure enough, other than Ling Lan, there were more or less some concrete stats for the other members. Hence, he set aside his dissatisfaction and began perusing the information intently.

Right after Ling Lan was information on the three regiment commanders, Wu Jiong, Li Yingjie, and Qi Long. The data compiled was fairly specific — their personality, attack specializations, etcetera were all listed out one by one. This included their mecha level, which was stated clearly as advanced mecha warrior. Of course, exactly which stage of the advanced mecha warrior level they were at was unable to be determined since the intel people had never fought them personally before.

Looking at this list, Qiao Ting was extremely satisfied. All the regiment commanders of the Lingtian Mecha Clan were advanced mecha warriors, and a majority of the sixteen team leaders under them were also advanced mecha warriors, with only four or five being intermediate mecha warriors — these numbers were completely incomparable with those of the Leiting Mecha Clan. This revenge fight would undoubtedly be Leiting's triumph.

However, this name list equally startled Qiao Ting. After all, the regiment commanders and team leaders of the Lingtian Mecha Clan were all still cadets who had just entered their second academic year. For them to be able to advance to advanced mecha warrior level at this age meant that they were absolutely prodigious characters with abnormal mecha piloting talent. What's more frightening is the fact that the Lingtian Mecha Clan had not just one or two, but a whole bunch of them... Hells, who would have expected the Central Scout Academy of Doha which had been quiescent these many years to actually produce such a mass burst of talent this year, producing so many geniuses in one go.

If the Lingtian Mecha Clan was given a little more time, perhaps the Leiting Mecha Clan would really be no match for them anymore. Qiao Ting secretly rejoiced, even more determined in his heart to utterly crush the Lingtian Mecha Clan in this revenge

match...

"Looks like, it is necessary to add on some wagers!" Qiao Ting finally realised personally why his vice regiment commander had decided to risk that wager back then for these people. In order to utterly eliminate the threat to the Leiting Mecha Clan's claim to supremacy, they could only completely absorb the other party into their ranks.

"Aside from this regiment commander of the Lingtian Mecha Clan being somewhat problematic, the others are all nothing to worry about." Qiao Ting's initially stern face finally cracked a smile — it looked like he had indeed been worrying too much.

"Just send the original name list as planned!" Qiao Ting finally made his decision. At his order, his confidant beside him immediately sent the pre-set name list over to the mainframe.

"Even if everyone participating are advanced mecha warriors, those I've chosen for our side are all advanced mecha warriors at the peak stage, just one step away from entering special-class operator level. Lingtian Mecha Clan... even without me taking action, my team members will be enough to make you all choke." A smug smile hung on the corners of Qiao Ting's lips.



"Boss, Leiting's name list is out." Little Four, who had been closely monitoring all activity of Leiting's side instantly managed to grab a copy of the battle name list Leiting had submitted to the mainframe.

In the middle of researching to decide which mentor she should choose, Ling Lan heard Little Four's cry and a smile appeared on her lips. As expected, Leiting had been unable to hold back. "Let me see."

Little Four immediately displayed the name list in Ling Lan's mindspace. Scanning the name list, Ling Lan nodded. It was as she expected — Qiao Ting truly wanted to emphasize his individual prowess in this revenge match.

"Even though they're all advanced mecha warriors, these operators have already advanced into that level for over 2 years. Whether in terms of mecha controls or battle experience, they outclass our team members by a lot." Little Four instantly gathered

all data he could find on everyone on the name list, and he could not help but warn Ling Lan, tone serious.

"With two special-class operators, Li Lanfeng and Zhao Jun, in the lead, even the most experienced advanced mecha warriors will end up as cannon fodder in this battle," said Ling Lan with a cold smirk. "Send over the name list we have settled on now as well then."

Qiao Ting, when you find out that we actually have special-class operators on our name list, will you regret deciding too hastily? A smile tugged at the corners of Ling Lan's lips; she really wanted to see Qiao Ting's face change in colour...

It turned out that this time, Ling Lan had chosen purely based on ability, without fearing any possible claims of nepotism. She had placed the strongest eight in her own battle clan into the name list, adding on Wu Jiong and Li Yingjie who were both at the late stages of advanced mecha warrior. Aside from the middle stage advanced mecha warrior Ye Xu, the final name on the list was the unexpected Gao Jinyun, who had only just entered advanced mecha warrior level.

The reason why Ling Lan had given up on picking other stronger candidates in favour of Gao Jinyun was that she wanted to see for certain what Gao Jinyun's skills were like in terms of mecha. Gao Jinyun may have passed in terms of strategizing, but his personal level of strength was equally essential — Ling Lan needed to conduct further observation.

Both sides had only sent in their clan's name list at almost the final moment of the time limit. As for when the fight would begin, that was not something they could control. The challenge time would be determined by the mainframe, which would only inform the two parties a week before.

After sending in the name list, Ling Lan stopped worrying about it. As for whether or not the opponent would manage to obtain their name list and figure out even more of their strength before the fight, Ling Lan very shamelessly threw the problem over to Wu Jiong to handle. Ling Lan believed that if she had to personally handle everything herself, that would absolutely be a sign of incompetence (Ling Lan would forever use brilliant methods to disguise her lazy nature).

After setting aside the matter of the challenge fight, Ling Lan once again turned her focus on choosing a mecha piloting mentor. The two months of mecha piloting theory

and knowledge class was coming to an end. From next month onwards, the cadets would have to follow a mecha mentor in practical mecha training. And now, an application to request one's choice of mentor laid before Ling Lan.

Yes, the cadets had the right to apply for any mentor they liked — they could choose and order up to three mentor candidates they most wanted to follow for their practical training. However, the application did not mean that they would definitely get the person they wanted. The instructors would also browse through the applications to select the students they wanted to take in as well. If the first-choice instructor refused, the application would automatically appear within the consideration pile for the second-choice instructor. And if the second-choice instructor refused, the application would then move on to the third instructor.

Although it looked like the application process was extremely ideal and fair, it should be known that every instructor had limited student slots. Very often, these instructors would have already filled up all their slots after the first batch of applications. Therefore, the possibility of being selected by one's second or third choice mentor was infinitesimal, unless the first batch of students was truly lacking... this also resulted in many students missing all three instructors they requested for, only to be saddled with the tragic outcome of being randomly assigned a mentor by the mainframe.

Thus, the cadets attached great importance to the application of mentors. In order to ensure that they managed to follow an instructor with an operation style similar to theirs, the cadets would have already begun studying the various mecha instructors in the academy from the time they first started school. They did not go after the strongest, only aiming for those most suited for themselves...

At present, Ling Lan had also come to the time to choose a mentor. This troubled Ling Lan greatly, for Ling Lan truly loved close-combat mecha down to her very bones. However, the military academy only had one ace operator mecha instructor specialising in close combat, and this one and only ace operator instructor just so happened to be a master of berserker attack methods, which was the complete opposite of Ling Lan's fine-tuned and delicate style of operation. If she chose this instructor, it was very likely they would butt heads, for any instructor would be unhappy with his own student not learning his style and instead choosing to do things their own way.

Ling Lan involuntarily looked at the number one instructor on the ranking list, Tang Yu. This was an elite mecha operator whom everyone in the academy lauded as a

mecha professor. He was undoubtedly one of the strongest mecha instructors in the academy, because he had a thorough comprehension of every type of ace mecha. Even though he was most proficient at long-range attack, his close-combat abilities were also very powerful, and because long-range attack required a great attention to detail, Tang Yu's operation style was extremely meticulous and delicate, belonging to the same category as Ling Lan's style.

"Instructor Tang Yu, eh?" Ling Lan frowned lightly. If Tang Yu had not just finished mentoring Qiao Ting, Ling Lan would not be so troubled. Ling Lan truly did not want to have anything to do with Qiao Ting...

"Oh, forget it, let's look for someone else." Ling Lan still decided to give up on that option in the end ², thinking to just randomly choose another from among the other instructors. After all, she was already learning mecha piloting from Instructor Number Three in the learning space now, so the practical training mentorship in the academy here was not as crucial to her as it was for the other students.

At this time, Little Four who had remained silent all this while could not help but speak up, "Boss, if Instructor Tang Yu is the best one, then why won't you choose him?" Little Four just could not accept his boss learning from a subpar instructor; that would be such a disgrace to his boss.

Chapter 398

The Problem of Dao!

"Thunder King Qiao Ting is Instructor Tang Yu's favoured disciple. If not too long after this, Qiao Ting loses at our hands, Instructor Tang Yu might hold a grudge." In response to Little Four's question, Ling Lan randomly made up an excuse.

"That's impossible! According to the data I gathered, Instructor Tang Yu has never taken in any disciples in the academy. Even Thunder King Qiao Ting is only a normal student of his," argued Little Four, "Besides, Instructor Tang Yu has stated clearly that he hopes to see his students surpass himself, each generation being stronger than the one before it. If you defeat Qiao Ting, Boss, Instructor Tang Yu will only be happy and not angry."

"Is that so..." Ling Lan once again turned her thoughts to Instructor Tang Yu. If that was the case, applying for Instructor Tang Yu should not be a problem. Although Ling Lan seemed to treat others very coldly, she was actually very respectful of everyone, especially those who had cared for her before. She was afraid that if she really applied for Instructor Tang Yu to be her mentor, and if Tang Yu happened to plead for mercy on Qiao Ting's behalf, though this would not shake her decision, she would still feel some guilt towards Instructor Tang Yu. This was something she did not want to see happen, which was also one of the reasons why she did not want to apply for Instructor Tang Yu.

"Also, Instructor Tang Yu is a mecha operator who daddy really appreciates." Little Four's face was shining — the moment they brought up Ling Xiao, Little Four would become unable to control his emotions; compared to Ling Lan, he seemed even more like a child of Ling Xiao's.

Little Four's words reminded Ling Lan that when her dad had left planet Newline after the battle back then, he had mentioned Instructor Tang Yu, saying that he was a true teacher. From his words, it looked like Ling Xiao was very much in favour of Ling Lan learning from Instructor Tang Yu.

"So father approves of him as well?" Ling Xiao's silly grin filled with indulgent love and affection surfaced involuntarily within Ling Lan's mind. Faced with this kind of doting

dad, Ling Lan could not find it in herself to refuse. Sighing softly, she decisively chose Instructor Tang Yu and sent out her application.

Ling Xiao's opinion was really hard for her to refuse. Ling Lan felt that it was becoming increasingly difficult for her to resist that powerful fatherly love of Ling Xiao's. Even when Ling Xiao was not by her side, that full berth of fatherly love would always appear in full force around her. Yep, the traitor Little Four was the culprit behind this. He was constantly whispering by her ear about how good Daddy Ling Xiao was and how it was oh so difficult to forget how good he was...

At this thought, Ling Lan threw a fierce glare at Little Four. This glare frightened Little Four — who knew what Boss had caught him doing wrong this time? Alright, Little Four had recently been hanging out most of the time in the virtual world; the bad things he had done were truly too many to count, even he did not dare to think too closely about it...

Having decided on Instructor Tang Yu, Ling Lan did not bother with choosing a second or third-choice mecha mentor. If Tang Yu refused, it did not really make much difference to Ling Lan which mecha instructor was assigned to her. Subsequently, all that was left was to wait for the mainframe's notification to see if her application would be approved by Instructor Tang Yu.

After completing the most pressing task for a second-year student, Ling Lan left the virtual world, returning to her room to rest. However, she had just lain down when a powerful suction force pulled her consciousness into the learning space. By now, Ling Lan was extremely calm in the face of such things. Every time her instructors wanted to see her, they would pull this stunt. The only thing uncertain was who had initiated it this time.

By the time Ling Lan became aware again, her eyes were greeted by a plain of clouds. Looking at the white clouds surrounding her, Ling Lan did not even have to think to know that this was Instructor Number One's place —— Mountain's Peak.

Ling Lan unhurriedly took control of her body and stepped out into the air. Finally, when she caught sight of a square platform below, Ling Lan descended lightly to touch the tips of her feet to the ground before landing firmly without making a sound.

"Recently, are you finding your force of presence harder and harder to control?" Right then, Instructor Number One was seated on a large rock with his back to Ling Lan.

Without turning his head, he asked her this question.

"Yes, Instructor Number One." Ling Lan looked at Instructor Number One, who was about three metres away from her, and suddenly sensed a massive wave of pressure pressing down on her. This pressure was much greater than any she had felt before, making her feel as if she could not handle it and was about to be forced to her knees.

But Ling Lan would not submit — she abruptly let out the force of presence within her in one powerful burst, pitting it against the formidable pressure Instructor Number One was plying upon her.

Instructor Number One's pressure was like waves at high tide, each wave heavier than the one before it — Ling Lan's forehead began to bead up with cold sweat, with more and more beads appearing by the moment. Her entire face turned pale and a trickle of blood suddenly flowed down from a corner of her initially tightly sealed lips... but even so, Ling Lan's body still stood tall and steady with no sign of submitting.

"As expected!" said Instructor Number One all of a sudden. Following this remark, the overwhelming pressure instantly disappeared completely. Taken by surprise, Ling Lan was thrown off-balance by the sudden shift and almost stumbled and fell. Luckily, Ling Lan had nimble reflexes and adjusted quickly — even though her body tilted forwards a little, she still managed to keep her footing.

"Your force of presence is too intractable, willing to break rather than bend..." said Instructor Number One faintly. His tone carried some trace of emotion, some approval as well as some regret.

"Isn't this good?" Ling Lan's forehead was scrunched up tightly. She could hear the regret in Instructor Number One's tone — it looked like there must be some problem with her force of presence now.

"It's not bad, it's just... you have forgotten you are a girl..." said Instructor Number One with a wry smile. If Ling Lan were a boy, this sort of presence would not be a problem at all, but she was a girl. A girl's body was 'yin' in nature, and intractability was a 'yang' trait ¹. This kind of presence which was contrary to the body it inhabited would inevitably cause the inherent nature of the body to reject and resist it. This was also why Ling Lan had found it so difficult recently to control her force of presence, letting it leak out all too often.

"How troublesome." Instructor Number One's explanation caused Ling Lan's frown to deepen. She had never imagined that the reason she was unable to control her force of presence was actually because her body had begun to reject it internally.

Mind you, in the recent past period of time, the reason she had become increasingly untalkative was that she had been putting all her effort into suppressing her body's force of presence. As soon as she started to speak, her aura would fluctuate and even show signs of erupting. At that time, she might very likely injure the companions by her side accidentally, and this was not something Ling Lan was willing to see...

"At the heart of it, it's still the fault of the Dao you have chosen. You should know that your Dao depends fully on self-exploration. There is no prior experience for you to reference. It's normal for there to be some deviation," Instructor Number One continued to explain.

"I think, Instructor Number One, you must have some way of resolving this." Ling Lan looked at Instructor Number One with steady eyes. Since the other had already diagnosed her problem, then he must have some solution. Ling Lan had the utmost faith in the omnipotent learning space and the omnipotent Instructor Number One.

Seeing the dependency on Ling Lan's face, Instructor Number One could not help but shake his head and smile bitterly in his mind. This Ling Lan was really becoming more and more shameless. Still, he could not ignore this beloved disciple of his. Instructor Number One could not help but feel that Ling Lan had only turned out this way due to them instructors spoiling her... though Instructor Number One just could not figure out how in the world they had spoiled her to this extent, considering how everyone had obviously been so strict with her.

After a moment of silence, Instructor Number One said, "I do have a plan. There are two choices. The first is for you to give up on the Dao you are walking now, choose some other Dao which suits you and already exists, accept the experience of your predecessors, and thus improve and transform your force of presence. This is the safest and also the easiest way ². I suggest you choose this one." Instructor Number One bluntly gave his recommendation.

After hearing all this, Ling Lan brushed off this option without any hesitation. "This, I will not choose." Since she had already decided to walk her own Dao, she had never once thought of giving up halfway.

"You've thought it through? You should know that the second method may very well cause all your previous efforts to go to waste, and it may even cost you your life." When Instructor Number One heard Ling Lan's reply, he immediately appeared right before Ling Lan in the very next second. His cold and piercing eyes stared intently at Ling Lan, as if trying to see for certain whether Ling Lan's heart was as firm and steady as her tone.

Ling Lan did not hesitate to meet Instructor Number One's gaze, declaring resolutely, "Yes. Even if I fail in the end, I will not regret it!" She was indeed very afraid of dying, but she did not want to give up on her beliefs due to this fear. This was the only thing she had learned over these past several years in her second life here.

"Good. Well said!" A glimmer of an approving smile finally appeared upon Instructor Number One's glacial face. "Ling Lan, listen well. The second way is to stay firm and unyielding. Since the two sides are repelling each other, you need to force them closer and make them merge."

"Stay firm and unyielding? Force them close to merge them?" Confusion appeared for the first time in Ling Lan's eyes.

"Just like how fire and water are mutually incompatible, but you will need to make it so that each has some of the other within it," A flippant voice rang out behind Ling Lan, and Ling Lan's initially steady body trembled minutely. The next second, Ling Lan had already turned around, bowed her head, and shouted, "Instructor Number Five, hello!"

Seeing Instructor Number Five appear, Instructor Number One once again dashed back to the top of the large rock, sat down, and closed his eyes, no longer caring about Ling Lan and the uninvited Instructor Number Five.

At the sight, Ling Lan knew that the following task of explaining would be taken over by Instructor Number Five now. She raised the questions she had in her mind, "Can water and fire coexist? I have never seen something like that exist, unless there are other intermediary substances present..."

"No no no, little Ling Lan, just because you've never seen it before doesn't mean it doesn't exist," said Instructor Number Five, shaking a finger as he replied with a close-eyed smile. Just then, he suddenly turned his head to look up at the empty skies around the cloud layer and shouted, "Number Nine, come out! I know you're there."

Following this cry, Number Nine's cold huff could be heard, and then a pair of ivory white palms suddenly appeared to pry the sky among the clouds apart, revealing a black space. In the next moment, Instructor Number Nine had walked out from the black opening to come and stand before Ling Lan.

"Ling Lan, long time no see." Instructor Number Nine's body was as cold and frigid as Ling Lan remembered, but her gaze could not conceal her affection for Ling Lan. Ling Lan's heart throbbed, and her eyes actually turned slightly red. Ever since Instructor Number Nine had finished instructing Ling Lan in top-level physical skills, she had never again appeared before Ling Lan. If she calculated the time, it had been about three years since they had seen each other — Ling Lan had really missed her.

"Instructor Number Nine, I am really very happy to see you," said Ling Lan respectfully, holding back the emotional upheaval in her heart.

Chapter 399

Personal Testimony!

"I am also very happy. You are becoming stronger and stronger..." said Instructor Number Nine approvingly.

Ling Lan was just about to reply when Instructor Number Five coughed loudly. Ling Lan and Instructor Number Nine turned in unplanned unison to glare at him.

Instructor Number Five rubbed his nose guilelessly and said, "I'm only reminding you all that right now, the pressing matter is to first resolve little Ling Lan's force of presence problem. Time waits for no man..."

At these words, Instructor Number Nine cast a piercing glance at Number Five. Number Five could only wave his hands again and again in response to the rage in her gaze, indicating that he had spoken unnecessarily. Perhaps it was true that every object has its counter — Number Five's perversity made all the other instructors wary, keeping a safe distance from him whenever possible. Even Number One could do nothing to handle Number Five. But Number Nine was not at all afraid of Number Five. She was the only one who could show any signs of temper towards Number Five, but Number Five was helpless against her, never ever having dealt viciously with Number Nine...

However, Number Five's reminder also let Number Nine know the mission she was called here for. She said to Ling Lan, "Ling Lan, first take a look at my ability."

She had barely finished speaking when five clusters of blue flame appeared on Number Nine's fingers. The flames that should obviously be producing heat, were paradoxically radiating a biting chill.

Ling Lan was startled. She could not help but reach out a hand to try and touch the blue flames on Number Nine's fingers, but she was quickly stopped by a sharp admonishment from Instructor Number Nine. "Don't touch. It will consume any kind of energy, including your spiritual self."

Ling Lan shrunk back, quickly pulling her hand back. Instructor Number Nine was not

like Instructor Number Five whose words were always a mixture of truths and lies — if Instructor Number Nine had said so, then it truly meant that these blue flames could indeed do all of that. Consuming any type of energy... this was really too horrifying.

Seeing that Ling Lan was no longer planning to move, Number Nine continued, "This is my awakened talent. The element I awakened is actually like yours, a water-based element, but a deviation of it. It's just that the talent you awakened was Ice Affinity, while mine was Ice Flames."

"Ice Flames?" Ling Lan was puzzled. She knew that water had three states — gaseous, liquid, and solid. Its solid state was the basis of her variant innate talent series of ice. Its gaseous form typically pointed to steam or fog series of talents, while its liquid state was the water element's most common form in innate talents. However, she had never heard before that the water series of innate talents still had a variant branch called Ice Flames.

"When I first awakened my innate talent, it was not in this form." Seeing the confusion on Ling Lan's face, Number Nine's cold and serious face actually held a trace of a smile. This slight smile lit Number Nine up, making her incomparably bright, which caused Number Five's eyes to flicker with a strange light as well.

"Ah..." Number Nine's words were completely beyond Ling Lan's expectations; when she had awakened her innate talent Ice Affinity, it had immediately already presented as ice.

In the face of Ling Lan's astonishment, Number Nine did not say anything to explain, only asking Ling Lan to look closely at the blue flames on her fingertips. As Ling Lan watched, those blue flames radiating an intense chill actually began to change in colour, from blue to pale blue to finally become transparent flames. And then, the flames gradually turned yellow, deep yellow, orange, red, deep maroon, and then, they finally turned into pitch-black flames. What shocked Ling Lan even more was how the temperature of the flames changed as their colour changed — from extreme cold, the temperature of the flames rose slowly until they finally became sizzling hot. Especially when they turned black, Ling Lan actually could not resist that heat that seemed as if it could burn away everything. She could not help but take three steps back — only then did she manage to tolerate that pressing heat.

"Instructor Number Nine, what exactly is going on here?" This was definitely not the water element...

"You can feel it, right? That's right, I actually have two awakened elements. What I awakened was both water and fire, elements that were universally acknowledged as mutually incompatible. From the very beginning after awakening these elements, my instructor judged that I would never become a Domain master, because these two elements I awakened countered each other and could not coexist. If I pushed on and levelled them up, as soon as the two elements clashed within me, my outcome would inevitably be death by combustion..." Number Nine recalled how she had completely lost all confidence when she had first heard her instructor's judgment back then. If not for Number One, she might no longer exist right now.

Mandora... the competition was too fierce. If one could not become strong, one could only be eliminated — this was something a high-achiever like her could not abide.

Ling Lan's eyes lit up at her words. "So, Instructor Number Nine, you managed to find the secret to mix fire and water in the end?" Ling Lan knew very well that Instructor Number Nine was a Domain master now.

"Yes. Number One told me that since the heavens have allowed these two opposing innate talents to awaken in one body at the same time, then there must be a way for the two of them to coexist. The heavens would not push a person to despair. No one had managed to do so before only because they had not found the correct method, not because it was impossible. You must understand that existence is reason enough." Number Nine passed on Instructor Number One's words back then to Ling Lan. Though Number Nine's telling of it was hazy and ambiguous, Ling Lan felt an idea spring to mind. Wasn't this the Taoist theory from her past life: the paths of life number fifty; the heavens spawn forty-nine, while man seeks the final one ¹? This meant that, no matter the circumstances, the realms of chance would forever leave a thread of hope for survival.

Number Nine did not know whether Ling Lan understood her meaning, so she continued to say, "From that time on, I began to research how I could get water and fire, these two mutually incompatible elements, to coexist. In the process, I was hurt many times, almost entering the gates of hell. Until one time, I turned my water element by force into extreme cold air..."

"Cold air?" Picking up on the strange phrasing, Ling Lan instantly felt that this might be the key point.

Number Nine's eyes revealed her satisfaction at Ling Lan's agile comprehension,

forever able to grasp the key points so quickly. With a smile in her eyes, she nodded and said, "That's right. In fact, for water to turn into a gaseous state, there are two ways. One is to use high temperatures to turn it into steam, while the other is to rely on extreme cold to turn water which has already crystallized into ice to vaporize into gas. This type of gas is the 'cold air' I mentioned..."

Ling Lan naturally understood this point, so she nodded.

Instructor Number Nine saw Ling Lan nod and knew that Ling Lan had indeed understood. And so she went on to say, "After I changed my water element into extreme cold air, I tried inserting that cold air into fire. You should know that when fire burns, it will produce heat, and cold air can compress this heat indefinitely..."

"Isn't this another contradiction?" asked Ling Lan, frowning.

"Yes. One side is producing heat while the other side is trying to remove the heat. It looks like they cannot coexist, but what if the temperature of the flame turns cold as well?" Number Nine seemed to be interested in assessing Ling Lan's ability to think. She did not state the answer directly, instead throwing the question to Ling Lan.

"Generally speaking, as long as the core heat of the flame is maintained, in theory, the flame would not disappear," replied Ling Lan after some thought. "However, till now, there has been no consensus on how much heat is needed to maintain the flame. Many scientists even suggest that negative temperatures can also maintain a burning flame, but this theory is currently unsubstantiated with actual numbers and is merely an exploratory theory." Ling Lan found the relevant theoretical discussion within her mindspace. As she spoke, her eyes became increasingly brighter, until she cried out joyfully in the end, "Could it be that Instructor Number Nine has truly found that data point where negative temperatures can sustain a burning flame?"

Instructor Number Nine nodded in satisfaction. "Yes. When I tried to lower the temperature of the flame, as soon as the temperature became low, the flame would become weaker and weaker until it finally fizzled out and died. However, I sensed that this might be the way out for me. After six years of repetitive research, I finally managed to turn the flame cold so that it no longer possessed the heat of fire. And when fire turns cold, it means that its friction against water had been reduced to the lowest point. Right after that, I spent another five years' time to finally fuse that water-based cold air into the cold flame. I just did not expect that the successful merging of water and fire would actually turn into Ice Flames capable of consuming every type of

energy... this thing, even I find it a little horrifying." At this point of her narration, Instructor Number Nine could not help but smile wryly.

At first, she had simply wanted to combine water and fire so she could successfully advance to become a Domain master. But by sheer fluke, her merging had resulted in an extremely horrifying killing move, forcing her to think twice every time she wanted to use her innate talent. Because once she used it, this meant a battle to the death with the opponent. Mind you, the moment Ice Flames came into play, there would be no survivors.

"I'm telling you all this just so you know that in this world, there are no absolutes. Just like in the case of your overly intractable aura — even though its trait is directly contrary to the nature of your body, that does not mean that there is no way to resolve this. Perhaps it will be very difficult to achieve a state where body and aura become one, but I believe that as long as you have patience and research meticulously, once you find the common ground between the two, that will be when you will be able to fully resolve this issue." Instructor Number Nine finally divulged her aim. She had shared her personal testimony so that Ling Lan would not be discouraged and become impatient, but seek a solution slowly.

"Thank you, Instructor Number Nine!" Ling Lan was deeply touched, once again thanking Number Nine sincerely. If even the most difficult and incompatible water and fire could coexist, then there should absolutely be no reason why the problem of her body and aura could not be resolved.

"Little Ling Lan, now you understand, right? If you want to walk your own Dao, then you'll need to depend on your own strength to solve this problem. None of us can help you." At this time, Instructor Number Five who had been acting as wallpaper all this while chimed in with a wide grin.

"Many thanks, Instructor Number Five." Ling Lan turned her head to thank Instructor Number Five, but compared to the thanks she had uttered to Number Nine, this one was obviously less heartfelt, almost causing the smile to drop off of Instructor Number Five's face.

"Ling Lan, since you already understand, then go back! Like Number Five said, everything depends on you now." Number Nine saw Number Five's face stiffen, and afraid that he would bear a grudge towards Ling Lan, she quickly urged Ling Lan to leave the learning space. That appearance of guarding one's child made Number Five

roll his eyes mentally... was he truly such a petty person? Eh? It looked like he really was! Sure enough, the one who knew him best was still Lil Sis Number Nine! Number Five stroked his jaw as he smiled pensively.

Seeing Number Five reveal such an eerie smile, Number Nine sensed the danger even more keenly. She absolutely would not allow Ling Lan to once again suffer Number Five's torments. Thus, she decisively shoved Ling Lan, and Ling Lan immediately felt her consciousness blacking out...

"Little Ling Lan, remember, the key to resolving this is the Dao you choose. Figure it out quickly. What is your Dao exactly?" In a whirl of chaos, Ling Lan seemed to hear Instructor Number Five say this right by her ear. This surprised Ling Lan — when had Instructor Number Five become so kind?

After what seemed like a long time but also seemed like just a blink of an eye, Ling Lan once again regained consciousness. By then, she had already returned to the real world. She glanced down at the time displayed on the communicator on her wrist. Yep, it was still the same time she had left — only 10 seconds had elapsed since she had been whisked away.

Chapter 400

Plan to Create a God!

"Beep beep beep!" Early in the morning, the still asleep Han Yu was suddenly startled awake by the alert ringing from his communicator by his pillow. Eyes closed, he rummaged around his pillow and got his hands around the culprit which had disturbed his sleep. Only then did he open his eyes...

Seeing a familiar name on the screen, Han Yu sobered up. He quickly sat up and clipped the communicator onto his wrist and pressed the button to connect the call.

Wei Ji's figure appeared on the virtual screen. He was frowning and his expression was extremely grim. "Han Yu, did you know that early this morning, the mainframe announced some news?"

"I slept very late last night because I was preparing the documents needed for enlistment. If you hadn't woken me up, I would still be sleeping!" Han Yu could not help but yawn. Them fifth-year cadets were all busy recently preparing to apply for enlistment, and so were almost completely oblivious to anything happening outside their windows.

"This past year of peace in the academy is coming to an end!" said Wei Ji solemnly.

"What happened?" Wei Ji's expression caused Han Yu's expression to turn serious as well. Han Yu knew very well that, as the vice regiment commander of Wuji, the other would not have come to disturb him so early in the morning unless something big had occurred.

"Leiting has made a move." Wei Ji told Han Yu the news he had learned this morning.

Han Yu reacted immediately. "The Lingtian Mecha Clan? Leiting's revenge match?" It looked like the Leiting Mecha Clan was truly vicious. Taking advantage of this time while the other party had yet to secure stable footing and were still weak to utterly crush the other.

"Yes. The mainframe has announced this news to every student early this morning.

The challenge fight will be a week later, starting at 1 p.m. sharp. I think you should have received it too," Wei Ji added.

Han Yu immediately began scrolling through the news on his communicator, and found that half an hour back, he had indeed received an alert from the mainframe. It looked like the academy was also taking this challenge fight extremely seriously, otherwise they would not have issued this school-wide announcement.

"Eh? Leiting has chosen the 12-man small-scale mecha fight? Isn't this obviously giving the Lingtian Mecha Clan a chance?" Han Yu saw the associated details of the challenge fight and could not help but be surprised.

"Look at who is leading the team," Wei Ji reminded.

"Qiao Ting, haha, looks like Qiao Ting has decided to be ruthless. He won't be happy unless he has completely destroyed the Lingtian Mecha Clan," said Han Yu gleefully.

Han Yu also hated the Lingtian Mecha Clan with a passion right now, because Li Lanfeng and Zhao Jun had refused to collaborate with Wuji again at the start of this academic year. After some investigation, he had found that this had something to do with the Lingtian Mecha Clan. Although he could not be sure whether they had really joined the Lingtian Mecha Clan, the very thought of the possibility was enough to incite Han Yu's envy and hatred.

Indeed, Han Yu had cultivated a strategist-type character like Zhou Ya specifically because he wanted to weaken Li Lanfeng's prestige within the Wuji Mecha Clan. He always remembered what the previous regiment commander had said — people not belonging to their own faction were not deserving of trust. However, he had not finished wringing Li Lanfeng of all his worth; he truly could not bear to let such an excellent strategist leave Wuji like this... at the bottom of it all, Zhou Ya was still a little weaker in comparison.

What made him even angrier was the fact that when Li Lanfeng had withdrawn and left, he had actually taken Zhao Jun with him. This infuriated Han Yu, as he believed that Li Lanfeng had dealt him a blow in secret. It should be known that Zhao Jun was their number one fighter in the Wuji Mecha Clan. Every time they had a conflict with the other factions, Zhao Jun was an indispensable mainstay of their mecha clan...

Thus, Han Yu hated Li Lanfeng, and this hatred was then extended to the Lingtian

Mecha Clan which Li Lanfeng was hanging around so much. If the Leiting Mecha Clan could deal a devastating blow to the Lingtian Mecha Clan, he, Han Yu, would be happy to see it.

Han Yu had thought things through. If the Lingtian Mecha Clan was thoroughly beaten by the Leiting Mecha Clan, he would definitely lead some people to seek out Li Lanfeng and Zhao Jun. Then, with an absolutely haughty and condescending attitude, he would dispense his mercy upon them. However, at that time, their relationship would no longer be that of collaborative partners but of master and servants.

"No matter what the outcome of this match is, it can be predicted that from now on, our academy will be dragged into power disputes among the various major factions once more." The actions of the Leiting Mecha Clan definitely would not stop there. After being a rival of Qiao Ting for four years, Wei Ji was extremely familiar with the other's ambition. If Qiao Ting could make all the factions in the academy submit to his before he applied for enlistment, he would be able to justifiably become the king of the military academy. This would be of great benefit to his future development.

If he had possessed Qiao Ting's current level of strength and ability, with the power of his faction, he, Wei Ji, would have probably found it hard to resist this temptation...

"We should also make some preparations. Perhaps after a period of time, we too will receive a letter of challenge from Leiting," said Wei Ji with a sigh. Without Zhao Jun around, their confidence was flimsy in going up against Leiting. Mind you, in their mecha fights with Leiting in the past, even though Zhao Jun was a level below Qiao Ting, he was one of the only three people who could withstand more than twenty moves from Qiao Ting. Of the other two, one was the regiment commander of Tianji, while the other was the vice regiment commander of Dwotong. In terms of mecha operation, both he and Han Yu were weaker than these three by a good margin.

"How terrible!" Han Yu had also thought of this. He slammed a vicious fist down on the edge of his bed, his hatred for Li Lanfeng rising once again. "Next week when the challenge fight begins. Don't forget to remind me to go watch it together." Han Yu had to personally witness the downfall of the Lingtian Mecha Clan — only with that would his rage be vented.

Due to Li Lanfeng, the Lingtian Mecha Clan thus became an innocent target for Han Yu to vent his anger.

"Who knows if the Lingtian Mecha Clan will choose to make the fight public? If they choose a closed fight, we won't be able to spectate even if we want to," said Wei Ji with a frown. The numbers of the challenge fight were chosen by the challenger, but the choice for the fight to be opened or closed laid with the side being challenged. Wei Ji was afraid that the Lingtian Mecha Clan would refuse to make the fight public in order to save face. If that happened, they would not be able to spectate the fight.

"I don't think that will be the case this time..." Han Yu's face was suffused with schadenfreude. "If that were true, why would the academy mainframe go as far as to make a campus-wide announcement? I suspect that the administrators of the academy are also thinking of using this challenge fight to restore the academy's morale. After a year of low spirits within the school, I think those old men are unable to hold back anymore." Han Yu had not been the regiment commander for Wuji for two years in vain — he did have some understanding of certain motives and strategies of the academy administrators.

Wei Ji's gaze lit up at these words. Indeed, the academy mainframe's announcement of the fight was indeed different from how things had been handled previously. It really looked like Han Yu was right — the academy administrators might very well be planning to use this challenge fight to rekindle the aggressive combative atmosphere of the military academy. In that case, they absolutely would not allow this challenge fight to end so quietly and unremarkably.

"The decision is no longer in the hands of the Lingtian Mecha Clan." Wei Ji could not help but lament silently for the Lingtian Mecha Clan — it looked like in order for the academy to regain its liveliness, the academy administrators were going to sacrifice the Lingtian Mecha Clan without any hesitation.

"Qiao Ting... his luck is amazing!" said Wei Ji, enviously. All conditions were in accord, everything favourable to Qiao Ting had been gathered — if he could not become the king of the military academy under these circumstances, then he would truly be unworthy of the care and attention the academy administrators were lavishing on him.



In the principal's office of the First Men's Military Academy, the seldom-seen principal finally appeared in this private office of his. His hair was white as stork feathers and his face was red and rosy, his entire person seeming very kind and friendly. However,

his eyes were lively and spirited, and at times would even shine with a keen light. Overall, although the principal was already over 120 years old, he did not look the least bit decrepit.

In this era, following the rise in individual strength and development, the human lifespan had long ago broken past the age barrier 10,000 years ago. Now, living to the age of 200 was a sure thing barring any accidents. Those with superior strength could even live up to 300 years. Although the principal's actual age was already over 120, his body was as strong as that of a 50 to 60-year-old man. Killing a level three demon-beast with his bare hands was still absolutely nothing to him.

Right then, he was looking intently at a proposal submitted by the vice principals and the faculty heads of the school. They were hoping he would approve their proposal and use the principal's authority to declare the challenge fight between the Leiting Mecha Clan and the Lingtian Mecha Clan as an open fight.

After perusing the proposal carefully, the principal said, "With regards to the rights and obligations of the two parties in the challenge fight, the mainframe has already outlined the rules. Unless completely necessary, it's better not to change anything."

The eight people seated on the sofas in the principal's office glanced at one another at the principal's words, and in the end, one of them spoke up to explain, "Principal, it's like this..." That person spilled their thoughts and suggestions, and ended with, "The cadets now are lacking a pursuable goal. Although General Ling Xiao is the national idol, a legend of our Federation, it is precisely because he is too strong that the cadets cannot convince themselves that they can ever achieve what General Ling Xiao has. Therefore, our academy needs to produce a new idol for them, a new legend closer to the cadets, one who is within reach and who may even make them feel as if, as long as they work hard, they too could reach his level..."

"The air invasion incident a year ago has still affected our students' morale. We need to make them forget about this and restore the fine tradition of our First Men's Military Academy — the fierce and aggressive competition system!" Another person quickly chimed in in support. "So, this challenge fight is a perfect opportunity. It needs to be open to the entire academy for viewing so that the students' battle spirit and bloodlust will be roused!"

After hearing what they had to say, the principal mused silently for several seconds, then said, "Are you all planning to use this challenge fight to create a legend?"

The group became still, sharing looks. They knew that it was impossible to hide anything before the experienced and astute principal. As such, all of them nodded honestly, confirming the principal's speculations.

"The person you all have chosen is Qiao Ting?" A glimmer of light flashed past the principal's eyes.

The principal's words received nods from around the room once more. Qiao Ting was originally already the only fourth-year cadet who had managed to advance to ace operator level — it was clear to see that the other's skill in mecha operation was abnormally strong. He was known within the school as the second Ling Xiao and had even received the favour of the Third Marshal now — his reputation within the academy was unmatched. As the top person in the academy, who else could they choose if not him?

The principal fell silent once more. Several seconds passed, as if he were analysing the pro and cons of the proposal, and in the end, he nodded and said, "Alright. Since everyone seems to be in agreement, I approve your proposal. I will use my authority as principal to set this match as an open fight. However, I must remind you all. Don't think that everything will turn out as you wish. Man can plan, but it is up to the heavens if those plans bear fruit. There are no absolutes. I hope that when the time comes, you all do not regret your decision this day!"

"Of course not!" they replied, different voices in unison. Overjoyed, they felt right then that the principal was obviously worrying for no good reason. If a newly established mecha clan could defeat a senior mecha clan led by an ace operator — now that would be a true joke!

Seeing that these people were not taking his warning to heart at all, the principal was not angry. Meanwhile, having achieved their objective, the crowd quickly bid farewell to the principal and left his office.

In the end, only the principal was left alone in his spacious office. He sat behind his office desk and lifted that proposal once more to browse through it carefully. Finally, his lips twitched and a snicker escaped him.

This bunch of fools... actually not taking the time and effort to properly understand the data on the members of the Lingtian Mecha Clan. The regiment commander of the Lingtian Mecha Clan, Ling Lan — that son of Ling Xiao who filled Ling Xiao's eyes with

unconcealed pride... how could he be mediocre? Knowing Ling Xiao, he knew very well that for Ling Xiao to take so much pride in him, Ling Lan's strength must not be simple. Ling Lan may even already be among the ranks of the ace operators. Would someone as aberrant as this be so easily defeated?

His subordinates' plan to create a god... heaven knows who the created god would be in the end?

The principal walked over to the window to look out over the entire academy below. A slight smile pulled involuntarily at the corner of his lips.

The First Men's Military Academy may become very interesting! Oh, Ling Xiao, who could have guessed that time would pass so quickly. The time has actually come for your son to show off his talent... I hope he will not disappoint us!



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